

“Being and Being Known”

Reading: Micah 6:1-8; Galatians 5:1, 13-26

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Once again, we've heard on the news a story of not just tragedy, but violence and hatred of a type that we cannot comprehend. That someone would deliberately aim a truck into a crowd of people celebrating, and that more than eighty people would die as a result, and that this sort of thing is now becoming normal in our world, makes no sense to us. We live in an age in which large-scale wars as we think of them are arguably on the decline, but instead of thousands of people killing thousands of people on a battlefield, we are perfecting the ability of a single person to kill tens, scores, even hundreds of people in our streets.

I remember reading about this latest attack in Nice, France in an article online shortly after it happened, and as I scrolled down I glanced at the first couple of comments made by other readers. And of course, as invariably happens on the internet, the first thing anyone had to say was that this was the fault of religion, and that we would be better off if everyone finally did away with such superstition and embraced reason instead. The unspoken assumption was that these sorts of acts can be laid at the feet of religious belief, that no other non-religious factors such as economics or politics or the problem of human evil could share in the blame. And of course in these comments people started arguing about whether Christians should be included in there, and whether Christians through the ages have in fact killed more people than Muslims, and on and on it probably went. I have to appreciate the irony of fighting about whether religion causes people to fight.

We can no longer take for granted that we as Christians have a place in our society. We no longer have a space saved for us at the table in our culture's debates about morality and identity. And honestly I'm not sure that's always a bad thing, because when we held a position of privilege in our society, we didn't always use it well. Maybe it's not a bad thing to have to justify ourselves from time to time, to ask ourselves why we are here as a church, and why am I as an individual committed to the cause of Christ. Why do I take time out of my schedule to participate in the life of the church, and why do I risk the ridicule of being a Christian? Why do I persist in this religion that is so often used to justify peoples' hatred and small-mindedness, and why do I believe in God at all when God is so often invoked in mindless violence? Is my faith really that different than that of a believer from any other religion, or are we all similarly deluded, and are we all just likely to use our religion to make the world a worse place than it would be otherwise?

There are a number of ways Christians have tried to respond to those sorts of questions. Some people try to appeal to the intellect, and so they construct logical arguments for the existence of God, and they might look at history and point out all the ways that Christianity has benefited humanity. They try to prove that Christianity is true in the way that chemistry is true or Newton's equations are true; faith in the God of the Bible is something that is empirically true, and if it's empirically true then you must accept it. Or if we go through history and prove that Christianity has done more good things than bad things through the years, then you have to reject the claim that the rest of society would be better off without us Christians. There's value in those sorts of debates, and there are many examples of people who have carefully weighed the arguments, come to the logical conclusion that God exists, and come to faith in Christ as a result. We ought to know the basis for our faith.

Those sorts of arguments were important in my own journey of faith. There were times in my past when I really wanted to run away from God, but I knew there were good reasons to believe, so I couldn't go far. But the longer I'm a Christian, and I'm speaking only for myself now, the more I find myself persuaded by a different sort of truth claim about Christianity. The problem with intellectual arguments about logic and history and so on is that as much as we try to come up with objective arguments for the truth of God, the reality is that different people are persuaded by different things. You can interpret the facts of history several ways, and there are always new ways of refuting logical arguments. But our reading from Galatians for today gives us what I think is a particularly persuasive look at the beauty of Christianity. It's not a statement of logic, and it's not an argument. It is instead a beautiful thing to behold.

Today we focus on the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Those are nice words just by themselves, but let's stop and think about them for a second. This is one of those passages of Scripture that removes the option of hatred and violence from the life of a Christian. Again, there are some people who blame Christians for all sorts of terrible actions through history, and it's certainly true that people calling themselves Christians have done terrible things and have claimed the name of Jesus Christ while doing them. But the Apostle Paul makes it clear: those sorts of things are *not* the fruit of the Spirit. You cannot invade a country and murder and pillage and do so as Christ's agent; it simply is not compatible with the fruit of the Spirit. The people who do those sorts of awful things might claim Jesus, but Jesus wouldn't claim them. So why can't we be lumped in with those who kill scores of people in the name of their god? Because the fruit of our religion is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

In fact, though we often quote the verse about the fruit of the Spirit by itself, it's part of a larger context. Not only does Paul tell us what the fruit of the Spirit *is*, he also tells us what it is *not*. He contrasts the fruit of the Spirit with the acts of the flesh: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like." The Spirit of God bears the fruit of love, humility, and peace in our lives, fruit that is often other-centered, while the acts of the flesh tend to be angry, violent, and selfish instead. The two ways are incompatible. You're either living the life of the Spirit, or you're living the life of the flesh.

But more than that, when I read about the fruit of the Spirit, I find myself drawn further into faith in Christ because this fruit is what I want in my life. I wasn't here for most of history; I didn't witness all those events in the Bible. And like I said, the logical arguments for God can be debated. But I know my own heart, and you know your own heart. I know what I would be like if Jesus hadn't found me. You know the dark places in your heart, too. When Paul describes the acts of the flesh, he's taking things to an extreme and painting with broad strokes; he's not saying that everyone apart from Christ does all those things all the time. But while your list of acts of the flesh might not be identical to Paul's, and my list might not be identical, you and I both know what's in our hearts. We might not know exactly how our lives would have gone if Jesus had not found us, but I know that I would be shallow, ugly, and fearful without His work of transforming me. I once was blind, but now I see.

This is why our faith is such a beautiful thing, an attractive thing, a good thing that calls each of us to strive to be something new. Where else do you hear people being called to such a life? And

this is not just a late invention of Paul, something that only appears once or twice in the Bible while the rest is full of bigotry and hatred and violence. Our corollary text for today comes out of the prophecy of Micah, and I could point us to many others like it. The Lord is making His case against His people and the way they've treated Him through the generations. He led them out of slavery and delivered them from the attacks of their enemies, and the people thought, in essence, that they could repay His actions on their behalf by merely making offerings to Him. I love how Micah structures it; there's an escalation to the sacrifices the people think God might want. He starts with calves, goes to thousands of rams and rivers of sacred oil, and ends by offering even his own firstborn child. But that's missing the point; God can't be bribed. He's not greedy for their stuff and He's not needy for their flattery. No, He wants them to reflect His own character, to be shaped by His presence, and so what He actually requires of them is this: "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Those aren't the same words as Paul uses, but it's the same Spirit. It's that same beautiful call that I hope would resonate with pretty much everyone, to live a life characterized by justice, mercy, and humility.

But here's the real point Paul is making. As beautiful as that call is to live a life characterized by the fruit of the Spirit, the real point is not that we should strive to make ourselves into that, but to *be* made into that. This is not the fruit of a disciplined life, or the fruit of a life well-lived, or the fruit of a nice person, it's the fruit of the Spirit. If the fruit is beautiful, think of how beautiful the source of the fruit must be. If you were here for Pentecost a couple of months ago, you heard the message that what sets us apart from other beliefs is not that we preach better virtues than them, but that we preach the presence of none other than the Spirit of the Living God in your life. We're not called to seek the fruit of the Spirit, we're called to seek the Spirit Himself.

Remember as we've been preaching through Galatians that the focus of this letter is on whether there are certain external markers that show whether you're in God's family or not. For the Christians in Galatia, the controversy was over the external signs of following the Jewish law. For us, it can be — and has been — something different. I've heard old Wesleyans tell stories about how you were seen as being too worldly if you cuffed your pants, until the fashion changed and then you were seen as being too worldly if you *didn't* cuff your pants. External signs are not what Christ calls us to. However, the fruit of Christ's presence in our lives will be visible.

During this season I know several of us have various garden plants that we're working on, trying to get them to bear some fruit for us. I've got some tomatoes out back that aren't looking too bad, though I'm not sure about my eggplants. The seed of each tomato plant in your garden has within it, you might say, the "image" of a crop of tomatoes, but what's needed is the sun and the soil and the water. The seed itself has no real energy or nutrients of its own. All that we as gardeners do to grow tomatoes, all the water and fertilizer and preparation of the soil, the entire point of all of that is to allow the plant to receive the energy from the sun and convert that energy from outside itself into fruit. All the work that we do in our spiritual lives is designed to receive the life of the Spirit, to bask in His glow, and to know Him better. Bearing fruit is just the natural result, and it doesn't come from us.

So today you are invited to examine the fruit your life is bearing. Hopefully you don't recognize very many of the acts of the flesh Paul mentions when you look at your life. Hopefully you recognize at least a few of the fruits of the Spirit. I confess that I'm not great at putting into practice

all of the fruit of the Spirit. I struggle with things like patience sometimes, but fortunately God has blessed me with a little helper to work on patience. But what does the fruit of your life say about the one growing your fruit? When you hear that passage from Galatians read, are there certain acts of the flesh that you struggle with, or certain fruits of the Spirit that you long for in your life? It's good to focus on being a certain type of person, but it's better to focus on knowing God and being known by God. So do you long for the fruit, or do you long for the grower of the fruit?



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