

“The Spirit in Community”

Reading: Numbers 11:10-17, 24-29; Galatians 6:1-10

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There’s a question you often hear someone ask when a conflict erupts. It gets asked in different ways, sometimes, but it’s still the same basic question. People start arguing with one another, or maybe things even get physical, or it can be a political mudfest on the national stage, and it seems like there’s always someone on the fringes somewhere saying some variation of, “Why can’t we all just get along?” Why can’t we all be friends? Why can’t we all just be nice to one another? What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of. That’s the solution to all the problems, right? It’s just that easy, isn’t it? What do we do about ISIS? Let’s just get along. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, just be nice to one another, for crying out loud.

Of course that sort of a reaction is naïve at best. You can’t solve all the world’s problems by just being nice to one another, though more niceness certainly wouldn’t hurt. Telling people to “just get along” can, at its worst, ignore and devalue what may be very legitimate criticisms and problems in peoples’ lives. Maybe we can’t get along because there are abuses or injustices taking place, and “just getting along” might mean that the abused party has to pretend that everything is fine. If you have a situation where one party is stronger than the other, “just getting along” probably means that the weaker party is just going to accept their weakness while the stronger ones continue to abuse them.

We can’t “all just get along” because community is hard work. Relationships are hard work. We could certainly all just get along if everyone saw things the same way – preferably *my* way, of course – but you may have noticed by now that not everyone sees things the same way. And if there’s a relationship of any depth, the conflicts are that much more likely to go that much deeper. Whether it’s a relationship between individuals or a community of many people living and working and playing in the same space, “conflict is the price we pay for intimacy,” according to Chris Kiesling. And it’s not like we could solve all our problems by living as individual hermits in far-flung caves, rarely if ever interacting with one another. We’re still all connected; sooner or later I’ll use some rocks for my cave that you were planning on using, or you’ll start fishing in my favorite secret fishing hole. Thinking that intimacy is the problem and therefore we should do away with it and all of our relationships should be on a surface level, and any conflict should just be avoided entirely doesn’t work.

Besides, that’s not how we were made. Think back to the very beginning, to the story of creation in Genesis. God creates a magnificent universe and fills it with life and beauty and order, and His last act of creation before declaring it all very good and taking His throne as its ruler is to create humans as His representatives and stewards over creation. God first creates one person, but almost immediately God realizes that it isn’t good for that person to be alone. So God makes another human, one like the first one, so that they can share in community. Part of the order of God’s creation is not only that we would be in harmony with God and with His world, but also that we would live in good relationships with other people. It’s how we were made to flourish.

But of course the next part of the story is one of conflict and the breakdown of community. The rejection of God as the rightful Lord causes that first community to go haywire, and relationships

become a source of strife as much as they are a source of flourishing. Adam and Eve choose not to stay within the bounds God gave them, and the result is that their relationship becomes a vehicle for blame, jealousy, and worry. Those first few chapters of Genesis don't tell us how much time elapsed between the creation of Adam and Eve and their Fall, but from our perspective as readers of the story, we see the creation of community and then its almost immediate collapse into struggle.

Community is tough, but it's what God created us for and what He calls us to. Relationships are difficult, but they're part of God's plan for our flourishing. I've said it many times before: you really cannot fully be the person God calls you to be on your own. Your spiritual journey is not just between you and God. For some people that's no problem, because they love community. For others, it takes some effort. But for all of us, there will sooner or later be a relationship or a community that is a struggle.

This last chapter of Galatians is all about how to live in community as the people of God. That's not uncommon in the New Testament. Many of the books in our New Testament were originally letters written by Paul or one of the other early church leaders to churches or individuals, so they were written to deal with a specific issue or issues for a specific time in a specific setting. Very often they generally follow the format of explaining the theology of what Jesus has done for us followed by an application of that theology to the situation at hand. Paul will give the background for what he wants them to do, then tell them what he wants them to do. So as we've spent the last few weeks exploring the book of Galatians, we've listened in as Paul explains the reason why these Christians in Galatia need to change their behavior. They've bought into the lie that God marks His people as belonging to Him through external signs like circumcision and the other outward signs of the Jewish Torah. It's not that those things are bad, it's that insisting on them as a condition of full inclusion in the church says, in effect, that Jesus died for nothing. His sacrifice was not sufficient to bring you into God's family, so you need these other things, too.

Paul says that no, the sign of being given a place in God's family is faith in Christ. How do we know who our brothers and sisters are? Whether they trust that Jesus is the Lord or not. That's pretty much it. And so he puts before us two different ways of living: life according to the flesh, or life according to the Spirit, as we saw last week. Life according to the flesh is bound to include actions and thoughts that make us selfish, petty, and ugly, while life in the Spirit bears the beautiful fruit of the Spirit, a life of love and peace and gentleness toward others. He ends chapter 5 by saying, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." And then as he moves into chapter 6, he continues to describe what that means. What do those virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, and so on look like when lived in community? How do we put into practice living in the freedom Christ gives us? That's what he describes in our reading for today. It's all about applying the message of Christ in the community of the church.

The fruit of the Spirit is beautiful to read about and beautiful to behold, as we said last week. But love, joy, peace, patience, and so on are not just lovey dovey mumbo jumbo that sound nice and mean we should just *be* nice all the time. There's power in the fruit of the Spirit. The mistake we often make is by falling to one extreme or the other: either we're legalistic by insisting people follow a strict set of measurable rules, or we slide into lawlessness, where we think being loving means there are no standards and anything goes; we just all get along by pretending everything is fine. But no, there's

power in the fruit of the Spirit. Power for transformation, power for deep community, power for real, meaningful intimacy and love in our relationships.

And so Paul describes life in the community of the church by striking a delicate series of balances between individuals, others, and Christ. Think about what he says. At the end of chapter 5 he says, "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other," and in 6:3 "if anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves," but then in 6:4, each one can "take pride in themselves alone." If a person is caught in a sin, "restore them gently, but watch yourselves" so you don't get tempted by their sin. "Carry each other's burdens," but "each one should carry their own load." Is he being confusing or contradictory? No, he's aiming for balance in your relationship with yourself, your relationships with others in community, and your relationship with Christ. This is wisdom to guide your relationships, not law to command them.

Let's first deal with the specifics of what he says so we can start to see the balance. There's a difference between burdens and loads. The word we translate as "burden" refers to something that is particularly unfair or overwhelming, it's a load that has been so overloaded that it's crushing. A "load," however, may be heavy and take some work, but it's manageable. So each one in a community should do their normal part, but when someone is faced with something overwhelming, we need to help them. Don't be a complainer, but also don't be judgmental when someone else is suffering. Or when Paul tells us not to be conceited, he's using first century standards that are hard for us to translate. In that culture, boasting about honor that was yours by rights was fine, but claiming someone else's honor for yourself was a grievous sin. So don't think you're better than others because of your spiritual pedigree or merit badges; that honor belongs to God. Give credit where it's due, and don't compare what God has done in your life with others.

As Paul applies the theology of the work of the Spirit in our lives, he strikes this balance. We receive and we share, we sow and we reap, we reap from our own actions and from the actions of the Spirit. Life in the community of God is an ongoing dance between ourselves, those around us, and God. The most important part of this sort of true community, Paul is saying, is the Spirit Himself. You just can't have the kind of relationships God made us for unless God is part of them.

That was the breakdown at the very beginning. Adam and Eve's relationship with one another fractured because they tried to remove God, and everyone since then has done the same thing. One of our readings for today came from the story of the Exodus, as God is leading His people out of slavery in Egypt and taking them through the wilderness to be formed into a nation. The people have been grumbling against God and against Moses their leader, and so Moses takes the issue to God. God's solution is to send His Holy Spirit upon a group of elders to share Moses' burden, and those elders are so filled with God's presence that they prophesy. And as we read at the end of that passage, Moses' wish is that *all* of God's people would be filled with the Spirit. God solves the problem of unhealthy community not by giving them more laws, but by giving them more of His Spirit. The point for us today is that the Holy Spirit is required for healthy community. We tend to think of those Old Testament laws as matters of right and wrong, and while some of them are, the main concern is to shape the people into a community that can live with one another and with God. It's all about fostering God's presence.

Paul is trying to help us see the difference between living in the Spirit and living under law. What Paul gives us is wisdom, not law, for living in relationship with one another. So often we have difficulties in life and maybe we turn to Scripture for answers, and what we want is a set of clear, absolute instructions that are guaranteed to work. We look for rules to live by, so we go through Paul's words looking for three clear universal truths about our relationships that will work in every case. And preachers often feed into this; we'll give you those three truths, and we'll make sure to start them all with the letter 'p.' But absolute truths like that are law, and the law is a thing by itself. Just follow what it says; there's no ambiguity. But wisdom is different; you need a guide.

The message Paul has for us today is not a list of rules for getting along with one another; the message is that Jesus Christ is the living Lord of all, and He has sent His Holy Spirit to dwell within us. Jesus has not left us orphans. He has not abandoned us and let us a list of instructions to follow or a rulebook for our community; He has instead left us with His own Spirit to guide us and shape us. The beauty of the church is that it is a deliberate community. We're not here by accident, we're here because we have responded to the action of God in our lives, and so we willingly enter into the difficulty of community together. But we do so walking in step with the Spirit.

So as you face the difficulties of relationships in your life, whether at work or home or church or somewhere else, there are certainly guidelines you can follow for navigating those conflicts. Love and forgiveness go a long way; doing good to all people, as Paul says, goes a long way. But what is ultimately needed is the presence of the Spirit in your life, and learning to walk in step with Him. Time is a gift from Him; don't rush His work in you, and give Him time to do what He desires. Sow to please the Spirit in your life and your relationships, and He will reap eternal life.



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