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Weekend of Sunday, July 17, 2022
6th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 16/Year C
First Reading: Genesis 18:1-10a
Second Reading: Galatians 5:1-26
Gospel Reading: Luke 10:38-42
Sermon Title: “Faith Working Through Love”

Theme

Texts

First Reading: Genesis 18:1-10a

¹The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ^{10a}Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

Second Reading: Galatians 5:1-26

¹For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

²Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. ⁴You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵For through the Spirit, by

faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

⁷You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? ⁸Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. ¹⁰I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. ¹¹But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹²I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Gospel: Luke 10:38-42

³⁸Now as [Jesus and his disciples] went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Sermon

Today is the fifth in the six-part series on Galatians and I thought you might be interested to know how a letter written midway through the first century exists today. Well, it doesn't, at least the original. Allow me to explain.

Although there are other ancient copies of Paul's letter to the Galatians, the earliest surviving reasonably complete version available is known as Papyrus 46. Papyrus is a material similar to thick paper that was used in ancient times as a writing surface. It was laboriously made from the pith of the papyrus plant, laid out in strips, and adhered together forming a sheet. Then a second sheet was laid on top of the first sheet at 90 degrees from the first sheet and pressed together. These double thick sheets would then be glued together end to end to form a scroll.

Scholars date Papyrus 46 to approximately AD 200, approximately 150 years after the original was presumably drafted. Papyrus was pretty durable for that day, but nearly 2000 years later, Papyrus 46 is fragmented in a few areas, causing some of the original text to be missing. However, through careful research and comparing it to other later manuscripts, scholars can be rather certain about what the original text said. (Wikipedia)

Today we are examining Galatians chapter five, where Paul is once again obsessing over "circumcision" and used the word or forms of the word five times in 26 verses. To be honest with you, I'm torn on the subject. I mean, you're either foreskin or against it. I know that was a bad joke. I've never heard a good circumcision joke. They always get cut off right at the end.

Now there may be some of you who think my jokes are inappropriate. I hear you. I didn't write the letter to the Galatians; I am just the pastor who has to explain why Paul seemed to be so obsessed with the subject. Circumcision is just one of the 613 commands and decrees within the book of the law. There are other equally questionably ridiculous laws – I would encourage you to read them for yourselves and see how many of them you have broken. Jesus Christ was, no doubt, circumcised. I don't know why Paul picked circumcision, but it as though he must have thought this one act of obedience to the Abrahamic Covenant was emblematic of movement away from the freedom from the law that he taught, back to obedience to the law that the charlatans taught.

Right from the beginning of chapter five, we learn that Paul was more than adamant that the Galatian Christians not submit their bodies to this form of obedience and he reasoned that if they submit to this one law, then they are subject to the entire law.

Allow me to give you an example that I am familiar with. I was a Boy Scout in my youth and to be a Boy Scout I had to agree to follow the Scout Law which is actually twelve laws. (recite the BS Law) If I told my Scout Master, Dick Bailey, that I was good with eleven of them, but really did not accept one of them, let's say, thrifty, then I would have expected him to say, 'Then you cannot become a Boy Scout.'

Paul reasoned that if the Galatian Christians were going to dabble in law-keeping, then they were obliged to keep them all because that was the only way they had any hope of justifying themselves by the law! By the way, was Paul trying to be funny when he said, ⁴You who want to be justified by the law (by circumcision) have *cut yourselves off* from Christ?

Moving on, Paul seems to be adamant about not allowing oneself to be circumcised but then in verse 6, he made two important points.

⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

The first point is that as far as one's salvation is concerned, whether one is circumcised or not makes no difference. By the way, about 38% of the world's male population is circumcised and in the United States, the rate is 80.5%. However, that is not because the US is a Christian country. It is because circumcision offers several health benefits.

The second point is that, according to Paul,

^{6b}the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Paul will get back to love in a couple of verses, but in verses 7-12, he ranted a little more about how well the Galatian Christian fellowship had been doing until they allowed themselves to be led astray. He wrote that if circumcision was able to save them, then Christ's crucifixion was a worthless gesture. And since Paul seems to be focused below

the belt, he wished out loud that those who were leading the Galatian Christians astray would castrate themselves – which reminds me of a story I heard.

A 35-year-old man went to his doctor and asked to be castrated. The doctor looked at him for a minute and asked if he is sure. The man said yes, he'd thought about it for some time and thought it was time to get it done. The doctor said 'alright, it's your body.'

After the procedure, the man woke up in recovery and the doctor came over for a chat. He told the man that while he was down there, he threw in a free circumcision.

"Circumcision!" the man exclaims. "That's the word I was looking for!"

Parents, you will have to explain that to your children.

As is often the case when controversy enters a congregation, there was backbiting and arguing and other bad behavior among the Galatian Christian fellowship. But Paul said 'It shall not be so among you.' According to Paul, being free of the law is the state of being that results from answering the call to freedom. And the Christian will use that freedom to love others, especially each other, without any bias. He reminded the Galatian Christians of the command in Leviticus when he wrote,

¹⁴the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

By neighbor, the Levitical command meant one's fellow Israelite and resident aliens in the land, but as we heard in last week's Gospel Reading, Jesus expanded "neighbor" to mean anyone! And Paul specifically applied it to the Galatian Christian fellowship. Paul indicates that what the Galatian Christians need is a circumcision of their hearts!

Finally, Paul seems to be done with the issue of circumcision (until next week) and moved on to exhort the Galatian Christians to "live by the Spirit" instead of gratifying the flesh. Gratifying the flesh is another way of saying, do whatever you want, do it if it feels good, and think only of yourself. I think we all know how to do this, but Paul offered some examples:

¹⁹fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

Once again, parents, I will leave it up to you to explain these to your children.

Moving on, Paul gave a list of behaviors that are examples of living in the Spirit. He called them, the fruit of the Spirit because when one lives in the Spirit, that one produces good fruit. And that good fruit is, but not limited to:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control.

Paul concluded chapter five by saying that faithful Christians live in the Spirit. We avoid those bad behaviors, not because they will keep us out of the kingdom of God, but because they are not the fruit of lives lived in the Spirit. And while living out all the fruits of the Spirit without faith won't get us into the kingdom of God either, with faith, the fruits of the Spirit just grow out of us.

In the First Reading from Genesis, Abraham and Sarah were already old. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 (Genesis 17:17) when the LORD came to Abraham and promised him that Sarah would get pregnant and bare Abraham a son of his own. A son born through his free wife, Sarah, and not a son born through his slave, Hagar. It's a crazy promise. People that old do not bear children – not then, not now! Abraham laughed when the LORD made that promise. But a year later, Sarah gave birth to a son by the name of Isaac. All names have meaning. Do you know the meaning of the name Isaac? Laughter.

And they lived happily ever after ... NOT! Read on past Genesis 17 and see what bumblers Abraham and Sarah were. They were not saints. They made mistakes. That isn't what matters even back in Genesis. The important thing is that God was faithful to Abraham, and Abraham was faithful to God.

In the Gospel Reading, Mary and Martha had an opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus, meaning to be his disciples, and learn from him what it means to live a life of faith. Martha was more concerned about hospitality. Notice Jesus didn't bring it up, Martha did.

^{40b}“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Raisin’ the Bar Challenge

We all get distracted from "life in the Spirit," as Paul named it. Those "desires of the flesh" are so attractive – and there is grace for those times we fail. But the faithful know the difference and make it our goal to live in the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, not of the flesh but in Christ, make time to treasure the Word of Holy Scripture that informs your lives of discipleship. Make time to sit at the feet of Jesus in prayer and devotion, where faith can be nurtured. And take time to demonstrate your faith by demonstrating the fruits of the Spirit.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, send your Holy Spirit that we may learn to hate what you hate and love what you love so that in all we do, we demonstrate the fruits of your Spirit. We pray this in the name of our teacher and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen