

Preaching Newsletter

Topic: Our Continued Calling

By: Dr. Eric Trozzo

Text: John 21:1-14

Introduction:

After Jesus' resurrection, he appears to the disciples twice in Jerusalem. Then he appears to them a third time in Galilee, where several of the disciples have gathered. Peter and the disciples had been fishing all night. In the morning Jesus appears to them, instructing them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. When they do they catch so many fish they cannot haul in the nets.



Law in the Text:

It would seem that even after the tomb had been found to be empty and Jesus had appeared to the disciples several times in Jerusalem, nevertheless the disciples returned home to the work that they had been doing before. It was as if their time with Jesus had been a failure and a waste. They had gone back to the Sea of Galilee to be fishermen. In fact, they do not seem to be having much success at this, either. They have fished all night and caught nothing.

Had Jesus called them to follow him in order to go back to the same life that they had had before? Had not their time with Jesus changed them? More than that, the risen Christ had already appeared to them several times. Yet somehow the lure of the simple and familiar life pulled them back. They had settled for a superficial existence of only doing enough to survive. They seem to have forgotten their broader calling.

Gospel in the Text:

Jesus calls out to the disciples at daybreak. They do not recognize him, and yet they instinctively respond to his command. He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. When they do this, their nets come back full of fish; more than they were able to haul. This caused them to recognize Jesus.

How could switching from one side of the boat to the other cause them to suddenly catch so many fish? Were the fish really confined to one side of the boat? Had they truly not thought to try another spot after one continually coming up empty in the first spot? Symbolically, we can see in this a symptom of the lack of vision from which the disciples were still suffering. They are stuck in one spot, unable to hear God's broader calling to them. They could not see that the fish were all around; they simply needed to do something other than the same old thing. Jesus appeared to them and called them out of their despondent complacency. He called them to think more broadly and expand their sense of purpose. He does this symbolically, but it points to a wider transformation to which he is calling them.

In other words, the grace in this text is not the miracle that they caught many fish. Rather, the miracle symbolizes a more powerful truth of grace. Jesus did not leave the disciples where they were. He had called them to more abundant life before, but after returning from Jerusalem they had forgotten it. Jesus, however, will not leave them alone. He will not abandon them. He reaches out to them to remind them about the abundant life he

promised them. That promise is still valid. They simply need to heed his call to look to the other side of the boat.



Transformation in the Text:

After they haul in their enormous catch, Jesus feeds them. He gives them bread and fish. This reminds us of John 6 and the feeding of the 5000 with bread and fish. In that miracle, the people had sensed that he was a prophet and attempted to make him king. He fled from the crowd at that time because the people did not understand what his kingship meant. The disciples now, however, were ready to understand Jesus' true kingship that included suffering for the sake of the world and giving his life as a ransom for many. Again Jesus' actions symbolically show them that he is assuming his kingly role now and that they are still called to follow him.

The eyes of the disciples have been transformed by these happenings. Whereas at the beginning of this passage they could not recognize Jesus, now they know it is the Lord. After they responded to his call to fish in a different place, everything else became clear. They now knew that Jesus would not leave them alone. Then in sharing a meal they cemented their trust in him. After the Last Supper they had abandoned him, but he returned and shared another meal with them.

After this meal, Jesus gives instructions to Peter. These instructions, which come after the section of the text we are looking at here, are the fruit of the transformation. In telling the disciples to cast on the other side of the boat and feeding them, Jesus pulled them away from being stuck in their past lives. He reminded them of the calling he had given them, and renewed that calling. He was telling them that it was time to go back out into the world to teach what they had learned from him.

Theological Reflection:

How often do we lose track of what Jesus has called us to be? We get busy with the things of our old life. We go to work, school, tend the house, talk with friends or spend our time on Facebook. All of our time goes to these activities, and we forget about the abundant life that Jesus promises to give us. If we are honest, we like the way things were. It seems easier to do what we have always done and what everyone else is doing. In this we are much like the disciples at the beginning of this passage. We have forgotten about the transformation that Jesus brings us and returned to our old ways of being.

Jesus calls us to a greater life than this. Jesus has called us to be children of God. This means to think more broadly about what God wants to do through us. We can look around and engage the world more deeply. This means changing how we live. Jesus calls us to look around and see what needs done. We are to find those who are in need of God's love. We are to grapple with theological questions. We are called to be transformed into disciples of Jesus. Being a disciple means not only following his teachings but also being agents of God's love reaching out to people and places that are suffering. Christian transformation is known in serving others and caring for the needs of the world, not in merely looking out for ourselves. We are to love others more fully than we could have thought possible without Christ, and this requires that we give up some of our old ways of being.

Jesus does not leave us alone in this work, however. He is the Lord, the king of this world. His kingship is not one of overbearing power, but rather one of being with us through struggles and suffering. His disciples, too, are called to live this kind of self-giving love. We can only do this, however, once we have been fed. Jesus gives us the spiritual food to strengthen us for such a new life. In our worship, we receive this food in hearing the Word of God, in sharing the sacraments, in confessing our sins and receiving the promise of forgiveness, and in gathering as a community of disciples. When we have thus been strengthened, then we are ready for our further instructions, just as Peter was ready after eating the bread and fish.

This passage is about how Jesus continues to unsettle our lives and call us to something more. When we come to know Jesus, his love burns in our hearts and it changes our lives. Yet our passion fades and our focus falters. In this passage we receive the assurance that just because we fall back into old patterns does not mean Jesus will depart from us. On the contrary, Jesus comes to us again and again to revive our faith and calling. Jesus' commitment to us does not falter. Jesus' call to a new, transformed life comes again and again.



What Theologians Say:

“The prince should think: Christ has served me and made everything to follow him; therefore, I should also serve my neighbor, protect him and everything that belongs to him. That is why

God has given me this office, and I have it that I might serve him. That would be a good prince and ruler. When a prince sees his neighbor oppressed, he should think: That concerns me! I must protect and shield my neighbor. . . . The same is true for shoemaker, tailor, scribe, or reader. If he is a Christian tailor, he will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbor. When a Christian does not serve the other, God is not present; that is not Christian living.”

— Martin Luther, “Sermon in the Castle Church at Weimar” (25 October 1522, Saturday after the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity).

Topic: Holy Living

Text: Galatians 5:13-25



Introduction:

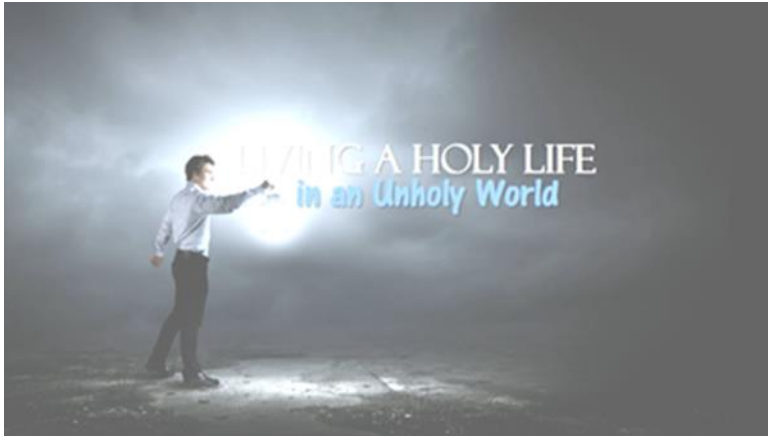
What does it mean to live a holy life? It can be tempting for some to see holiness as a matter of following lists of “do’s and don’ts;” that is, following a set of rules for what not to do and a set of rules for what to do. Passages of scripture like this one can be heard to support this view, as Paul gives exactly those kinds of lists. But to hear Paul as bringing a set of rules or laws misses his point about holy living. While it is true that he gives a listing of virtues and vices, and lying behind this list is Paul’s powerful encounter with God’s grace known through Christ. Even more, however, Paul views holy living as a life led by the Holy Spirit to form a Christian community of love and service.

In this epistle, Paul is quite agitated because the church in Galatia seems to have drifted from following Paul’s understanding of the gospel to other teachers that insisted on the observation of Jewish laws and rituals. Paul considers this to be a dire threat to the “truth of the gospel,” (as we see in Galatians 2.5) that requires immediate correction. Paul’s emphasis in this letter is that righteousness comes through faith in Christ and not through following the law. In this, the theme of the epistle is stated most clearly in 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” That is, in Christ we are free from the demands of the law.



Law in the Text: If we are free from the demands of the law, why do we see Paul condemning certain behaviors in the passage in chapter 5? It would seem that some of the people were using the message of freedom from the law as an opportunity for selfish behavior. These people continue to live by the flesh. We might recall from previous issues of *Pathways to Preaching* Paul's distinction between "flesh" and body:" the "body" (*soma*) is our physical body and is morally neutral, while "flesh" (*sarks*) indicates our bodies fallen into sin. Paul notes that the works of the flesh are obvious, with examples such as fornication, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, envy, drunkenness, quarrelling, and so forth. What is obvious about these behaviors is that they are self-centered. They are actions that place oneself over the needs of others. To use one's freedom in Christ for one's own gain is the mark of living in the flesh rather than by the Spirit.

When we fail to follow the law, there are consequences. Drunkenness, for instance, is unhealthy for our bodies. It also leads us to broken relationships with other people. The same is true with the other behaviors listed here. The consequences of falling into the sinful works of the flesh are injury to ourselves and others. In such actions, we go against God's vision of harmony within the world that God has made. They create a disruption to the goodness of God's creation. Thus through our self-centered actions we separate ourselves from God.



Gospel in the Text: Living in the Spirit, we are free from the law. When Spirit gives us life, we need not be told what to do. The Spirit moves us to seek the best for others. We are not bound by specific laws and rituals. In 5:6 Paul announces the theme that lies behind verses 13-25: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” The specifics of our actions are not what counts: rather it is the question of whether our will is motivated by faith to turn us towards others in care. Our freedom in Christ, then, is not one for returning to our old patterns of self-centered life, but rather is the freedom to leave those sinful patterns behind and to live our lives for the good of others. We are freed from the separation from God that we have created; God breaks through it and comes to us!

Transformation in the Text: As we have seen, then, when we receive the gospel of freedom it allows us to care for others. In this we see that Paul holds that there is only one fruit of the gospel, and that is love for others. This fruit is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, but it is in fact one fruit. These characteristics are all aspects of being “slaves to one another.” (5:13). They are about living for the needs of others rather than out of self-indulgence. Thus the transformation seen through the gospel is a turn from being focused inwardly on ourselves to outwardly on the needs of others. Transformation in the gospel is growth in love for others.

The constraints on our freedom are the responsibility and commitment to the welfare of others in the community. Yet in the Spirit these constraints are not truly constraints. What is transformed is our will. We are moved from a desire to satisfy our own concerns and wishes to commitment to addressing the concerns of others. This is not a limitation but a joy, and law cannot prescribe how to be joyful.

The love of neighbor as well as the self that Paul references in 5:14 opposes the works of the flesh, such as the items in Paul's partial list of works which harm and disrespect oneself and others in the community. Again, what matters is faith working through love. To love is to live by the Spirit. To live for the self is to live in the flesh. Holy living means being led by the Spirit to love others.



Theological Reflection:

What, then, can we find here about holy living? Life in the Spirit is a life of commitment to the community. It is a life of love. We can recognize the difference between a work of the flesh and a work of the Spirit through asking whether it is an act where a person is focused on attending to their own needs or an act of care for the needs of others.

At the same time, we must remember that the difference between selfish acts and selfless ones is a matter of motivation. Motivation cannot be seen. We can never be entirely sure of our own motivation, let alone the motivation that drives others. While it is certainly true that some acts are obviously self-indulgent, most actions are mixed. Some concern for

others is mixed into many selfish acts. More importantly, I would argue, is that even the most self-sacrificing human acts have some degree of selfishness mixed into them. We cannot be free from sin, but rather are entrapped by it.

Indeed, it is crucial that we remember that the fullness of life in the Spirit is at present incomplete. We are called to a life in the Spirit, but we are also not yet fully free from being entrapped in sin. Nonetheless, God has already rendered a verdict of “no condemnation” on our sins, as Paul argued in Romans 8:1. Thus even though sin is still a reality in our lives, we are not condemned for this reality. We are called to a new life, but we are not condemned for being under the sway of sin. Instead of condemning us, God has condemned sin itself. Thus we lived a mixed existence, knowing what we are called to be but not able to be that person.

Thus on the one hand, we gain an image of the Christian community as being one of intense love for one another. This love is marked by service towards each other, as mutual slaves to one another. Such a community is not possible within the world as it is now. The holiness of the church is an eschatological hope of the community of saints that will be, but cannot be a fully experienced reality now. Holy living is thus a life of yearning for the Spirit to move in us, free us from being self-centered, and turn us in love towards our neighbors. Holy living is known in our love for one another.

Quotes from Theologians:

“This fellowship [of the church] is twofold: on the one hand we partake of Christ and all saints; on the other hand we permit all Christians to be partakers of us, in whatever way they and we are able. Thus by means of this sacrament [of communion], all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all; and through the change wrought by love there is one bread, one drink, one body, one community.” – Martin Luther