

The Holy Spirit Transforms Us Gal. 5:16-26 3/22/20

A long time ago- well it seems like a long time ago- before the Coronavirus had spread to the East coast, before our stores and restaurants closed, before we could only hang out with our friends from a distance, and before we could worship in our pajamas and not feel strange about it- before all of that, we were talking about the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives during this season of Lent. Remember that? We noted that the Spirit gives us power to witness to our faith, indwells all followers of Jesus, and helps us in a crisis like the current pandemic. This week we'll deal with a question many people have about the Holy Spirit: How do you know that you've got the Spirit? After all, you can't see or hear the Spirit. How do you know that the Spirit is there? This morning we'll talk about one of the ways we can know that the Spirit is active in our lives.

Many years ago I served as a youth director and Christian educator in a Pentecostal church. If you had asked people in that church how you could know that the Spirit was present in your life, many of them would have said, "That's easy! If you're filled with the Spirit, you'll have a special gift of the Spirit, like speaking in tongues or prophecy. And, if you don't have those gifts, then the Spirit is not active in you. Based on what St. Paul has to say in Galatians 5, I believe they were wrong! There, Paul

says that the true evidence of the working of the Spirit is a transformed character, which he calls “fruit of the Spirit.”

Paul begins with the premise that each of us has two competing natures- our old, sin-bent nature, which he calls “the flesh,” and our new nature in Christ, empowered by the Spirit. Both of these natures produce their own kind of fruit. Listen to what he says.

*<sup>16</sup>Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For 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. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, 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. (Gal. 5:16-21)*

We were created by God to be in loving relationship with God and one another. But sin has bent our nature, so that we are now turned inward, resulting in the kinds of self-centered “fruits” that Paul lists in these verses. Sin has tainted every aspect of our relationship with God and others. The first three traits in Paul’s list- “fornication, impurity, and licentiousness”- have to do with the corruption of our sexual relationships.

The next two- “idolatry and sorcery”- are a distortion of our relationship with God. The last group- “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these”- these have to do with the corruption of our relationships with other people.

If you’ve been paying attention, you’ve seen some of these traits on full display lately as the pandemic has spread- “strife and dissensions and factions” between countries and races, between government offices, and between average people. Anger has certainly been present. And we have seen “drunkenness and carousing” among people in some countries who are rebelling against the restrictions placed on them by their governments. None of this should surprise us, as this is human nature in action- “the flesh” in Paul’s words. It’s just a little more out in the open as people become more afraid and desperate.

But fortunately, this is not the end of the story. We are not hopeless in the face of our human nature. With God’s help we can transcend it! Listen to the next verses. <sup>22</sup>*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,* <sup>23</sup>*gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.* <sup>24</sup>*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* <sup>25</sup>*If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.* (Gal. 5:22-25)

According to Paul, the mark of the Spirit, the evidence of the Spirit's presence is not in flashy shows of certain spiritual gifts, it is in the virtues that make up our character. The evidence of the Spirit is a life that is more loving, joyous, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. It seems to me that we desperately need these fruits of the Spirit in a time like this! We talked about the first one, love, last week. We said that love in a pandemic does or refrains from doing things that might spread the virus to others. Love refrains from blaming others for the illness. It reaches out to those in need. And it prompts us to pray for our public health officials and for one another.

Joy can be a challenge in the midst of such disruption, but it is a sign of God's presence with us. In the New Testament, joy often has the meaning of deep contentment. Perhaps we can learn to be content even with the losses and restrictions with which we are living. Next is peace- both inner peace in the face of anxiety, and peace between people. We need both kinds of peace right now. Patience is required of all of us, as we wait to see what happens, living in a very inconvenient way- sometimes spending a lot more time with our kids or spouses than we're used to, because we're all home so much more. And that can be a challenge! Just sayin'! Kindness, generosity, faithfulness and gentleness will shape our response toward those who are afflicted with the disease, or who are most

vulnerable to its effects. And self-control helps us to do the right thing—limiting our contact with others and refraining from hoarding. We are in the midst of a crisis which cries out for these virtues, these fruits of the Spirit!

And I would go one step farther. Please hear me clearly: I am not saying that God caused this virus and epidemic, but I believe that God can and will use this crisis to develop these fruits of the Spirit in us, if we'll allow God to do so. In John 15, Jesus uses the metaphor of a gardener pruning his vines as an image of what God does to us to help us to produce more fruit.

Some of you know that I do a little gardening. I've spent a good bit of time over the last few weeks pruning my trees and vines. Pruning has honestly been one of the hardest things for me to learn. Usually, I'm just thrilled that my plants have actually grown! The last thing I want to do is cut off that hard-won growth. But I've learned over the years that such pruning is essential to the health of the plants and is necessary if they are to be fruitful. These slides show what my grapevine looked like before pruning. Then I pruned it. Here's what it looked like when I was done! I probably took off 75% of the plant! But it's necessary if the vine is going to produce those Concord and Niagara grapes that I love.

The restrictions recently placed on us are functioning like a kind of spiritual pruning. They have undercut some of the things on which we

usually rely for our comfort and security- for example, fully-stocked aisles at the grocery store, going to work each day, having close interactions with colleagues or friends or even extended family, and regularly congregating with our church family. Those things are important to our sense of security and meaning, as well as our emotional and spiritual health, and now they are gone. But the loss of them can function as a kind of pruning, if we allow ourselves to reflect a bit, and learn to rely on God to help meet these needs in other ways. That's how the fruit gets produced, how God transforms our character- through the Spirit's careful pruning of our lives in difficult circumstances.

We are facing a dangerous virus that calls for extraordinary sacrifice. Let's open our hearts to the One who wants to help us get through it and bring us closer to him in the process.