

“Unbinding Your Heart Through Relationships” Gal. 5:16-26 3/3/13

This morning we continue our series based on Martha Grace Reese’s book, Unbinding Your Heart, which is being used in a number of small groups around our church. The book is designed to help mainline churches like us become better at sharing our faith with others. You should know that there’s nothing new about this emphasis. In fact, in the 1970’s all the mainline denominations created programs on evangelism due to the losses in membership they were experiencing. A lot of money was spent designing and teaching these programs. They didn’t work. Why is that?

I think we find the answer in Reese’s book. In the third chapter, she suggests a model for talking about relationships in the church. As you can see, it features three interlocking circles: Relationships with God, Relationships between Church Members, and Relationships with People Outside the Church. She maintains that all of these relationships are important to any vital church. I suspect those evangelism programs in the 1970’s only focused on the “Relationships with People Outside the Church” circle and ignored the others. If we want to learn how to effectively reach out to folks outside the church, Reese reminds us that the other two circles are important, too.

I’m not going to spend much time this morning on the first circle, “Relationships with God,” because we spent last week on that one as we looked at the practice of prayer. I agree with Reese that many mainline

churches have neglected helping their members in this area. We're working very intentionally on this here at GPC, especially in our Adult Discipleship Committee, and we'll continue to do so. For help in this area, I would encourage you join a small group or a Sunday School class or to go on a mission trip. Also, Lou or I would be glad to meet with anyone who wants to work on their relationship with God. Helping people grow in their relationship with God is foundational to all we do.

I'm also not going to spend much time on the third circle, "Relationships with People Outside the Church," because we'll give that a lot of attention over the next couple of weeks.

So this morning, we're going to focus on the second circle, "Relationships Between Church Members." To do that, I'm going to have us look at a passage from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia, which were located in modern-day Turkey and Syria. We'll begin in chapter 5, verse 16. *16 Live 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.* (Gal. 5:16-18)

St. Paul often contrasts two ways of living- living by the flesh and living by the Spirit. For Paul, living by the flesh means living according to our natural, sinful nature. It's the way we would all live if it were not for the

work of God's Spirit in our lives. We might think that living by the flesh would be mostly about carnal appetites like sexual sin, drunkenness, and gluttony. Those are certainly included, but living according to the flesh covers a lot more ground than those things. Listen, as Paul clarifies what he has in mind in the next verses.

¹⁹*Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,* ²⁰*idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,* ²¹*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. 5:19-21)*

You can see that sexual sins and drunkenness and wild partying are included, but notice that most of the sins listed here have to do with how we treat one another! So this passage speaks directly to our relationships with one another in the church, which is our topic today. Let's look at these things in a little more detail:

Enmities has to do with hostile feelings between social classes or ethnicities or hostile feelings between individuals.

Strife takes those feelings to the next level. The word could also be translated as "contentiousness." For some of us, living according to the flesh leads us to seek out and nurture conflict with others.

Jealousy may feed into these conflicts. Jealousy resents the good that another enjoys. Envy, which appears near the end of the list, functions in a similar way.

Next is anger, perhaps better translated as “fits of rage.” Do you know anyone who has this problem? In the past, I have worked with both church staff members and other congregation members who were prone to fits of rage. They had not learned to deal with anger in a constructive manner, so they would occasionally explode in rage, damaging those around them with their verbal attacks.

Finally, we come to Quarrels, Dissensions, and Factions. In Greek, these words are very similar in meaning. The first word was often applied to those who try and convince others to join their side in a dispute, leading to competing “parties” or factions. This was a major problem in the early church, and still is today. The second word is a broader word for disunity in the church. Paul teaches elsewhere that the church is the Body of Christ. So, we are to treat one another in a way that honors Jesus. Disunity shows that we are not behaving as members of Christ’s body. Factions are the end result of quarrels and dissensions. At this point, people have chosen to be in various camps or groups in opposition to one another.

This reminds me of the story of a pastor who returned to visit a church he once served. During his visit he ran into Bill, who was no longer

active in that church. “Bill, what happened? You used to be here every time the doors were open!”

“Well, Pastor,” replied Bill, “a difference of opinion arose in the church. Some of us couldn’t accept the final decision, so we left and established our own church.”

“Is that where you worship now?” asked the pastor.

“Uh, no,” said Bill. “Some of the people in the new church wanted to take it in the wrong direction, so a group of us left and started again.”

“And has that worked out well for you?”

“Not exactly. Satan was at work even there, so my wife and I left and began to worship at home on Sunday by ourselves.”

“Then at last you’ve found inner peace,” said the pastor.

“I’m afraid not,” replied Bill. “Eventually my wife began to develop ideas that I’m just not comfortable with, so now she worships in the northeast corner of the living room, and I am in the southwest!”

That where “Quarrels, dissensions, and factions” eventually end up!

According to the passage, if these things are present in our lives or in our church, they are evidence that we are still living apart from the Spirit of God. That we have not allowed God’s Spirit to penetrate our hearts so that our lives are changed. That we are not filled with the Spirit.

The good news is that God has not left us helpless against these destructive patterns in our relationships with one another! Jesus Christ has given us his Spirit to help us live differently. Listen:

22 By 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. (Gal. 5:22-23) Many of you are familiar with these verses containing the “fruits of the Spirit.” You may have learned about them in Sunday School or Youth Group. You may have even learned a little song about them. Unfortunately, sometimes these are taught as something so deep and “spiritual” that we lose sight of how very down-to-earth and practical they are. Once again, they mostly have to do with how we treat each other! Notice how many of them involve human relationships. Let’s look at the list.

Love is the one that probably encompasses all the others. Paul uses the Greek word *agape* here, which is the same word he uses to describe God’s love for us. *Agape* has little to do with feelings, but is an action-based, self-sacrificing love which acts in the best interest of the other person.

Peace is often understood to mean inner peace here, and it probably includes that. But it certainly encompasses peace in our relationships with one another, too. In Paul’s time there was tremendous animosity between Jewish Christians and those Christians who had converted from Greek paganism. Sometimes they wouldn’t even eat together! Earlier in this

letter, Paul makes it clear that in Christ, there is no more Jew or Gentile!

These divisions no longer matter. All are one in Christ. One of the things God's Spirit does is to bring peace between people.

Patience can be a challenge for many of us! I often struggle with patience when I'm driving. Just ask my wife! When I am impatient with someone, what I am really saying is my time, my needs, my wants are more important than your time, your needs, and your wants! Patience acknowledges that the needs and opinions of another person are just as important as mine are!

Kindness has a wonderful lubricating effect on our relationships with one another. A kind person has empathy for others and looks for ways to be of genuine help.

Generosity means being generous in spirit as well as in material things. For example, it involves believing the best about someone, forgiving minor offenses, and not pointing out the flaws of others.

Gentleness or meekness is a word which was used to describe Jesus. In that ancient culture, the word also implied strength! It is not a sissy, "girly-man" word! Someone with gentleness knows their strength and power, but does not abuse it.

Finally, self-control works in concert with several of the other virtues or fruits of the Spirit listed here. Rather than indulging my irritation or anger with another person and venting it on them, or spreading my discontent to

others, self-control helps me to moderate my actions in order to maintain peace and unity in my relationships with others.

OK. What does all of this mean for a church that desires to successfully reach out to those who don't have a church home? First, if a church has a reputation for safe, healthy, affirming relationships, that can be a real attraction for people looking for those kind of relationships. That's what happened in the very early church, when people were drawn to the church by the way they treated each other. Read Acts 2-4 for a good account of this. On the other hand, if a church is known for lots of infighting and factions, many people will avoid it like the plague!

In addition, I think members of a church in protracted conflict are often reluctant to invite friends and acquaintances into that. It reflects badly on them. More importantly, it reflects badly on Jesus Christ, whom we claim to love and serve! The quality of our relationships with one another has an impact on our ability to attract and maintain new members.

Let's talk very directly for a minute! How are we at GPC doing in our relationships with one another? My guess is that different people in our church would answer that question differently depending on their individual experiences here. My impression is that we do some things really well. When we know that someone has some kind of need, our deacons and others do a great job of providing physical and spiritual support. That's evidence that God's Spirit is building love, kindness, and generosity into us.

Still, in a large church like this one, it is possible for some people to get “lost between the cracks” and not noticed when they are missing or are in need of help. We’re working on that. Please let us know when you are aware of someone who could use some support.

One area that I think we do need to work on has to do with how we handle conflict. I believe that churches, like all other human organizations, will inevitably have disagreements. There’s nothing wrong or even negative about that. It just is. The trick is how we deal with that conflict. We can deal with it according to the flesh, as Paul outlined in Gal. 5, or we can deal with it according to the Spirit. Dealing with it according to the Spirit would involve going to the person directly with whom we have an issue and trying to resolve it. That’s precisely what Jesus commanded us to do in Matt. 18. Spirit-filled conflict resolution avoids gossip and any behavior that would smear the reputation of another person or give rise to factions in the church. We haven’t always dealt with conflict constructively around here, but I’m confident that with the help of the Spirit, we can do better.

When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper in a few minutes, let’s remember that we do so together, as the Body of Christ in this place. During this time, envision ways you can contribute to building a strong, generous, loving community here at GPC. Confess to the Lord ways in which you may have contributed to divisions or factions between people

here or in other settings. Ask God to help you overcome those tendencies and instead be a source of goodwill and encouragement. If you do, God will wipe the slate clean, and empower you to do just that! That's the good news of the gospel! God can and does change us so that we can be the people he created us to be.