

Freedom Blossoms

¹ Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again. ¹³ You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. ¹⁴ All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other! ¹⁶ I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. ¹⁷ A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law.

¹⁹ The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, ²⁰ idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, ²¹ jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won't inherit God's kingdom.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified self with its passions and its desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit.

Before beginning a sermon on the fruits of the Spirit, I should offer a disclaimer: **I'm a few fruits short of a basket.** I am not always a patient man. I broke our *silverware drawer* last week. I stacked the knives too high and one of them got stuck between the top of the drawer and the other knives. Instead of giggling the drawer patiently, I just pulled and pulled and pulled until I ripped the face of the drawer off. I can be an impatient man; I don't always follow the Spirit.

I'm in good company though. *Paul struggled to take his own advice too.* Writing to churches he established in the region of Galatia, Paul warns against participating in **(1) fighting, (2) competitive opposition, (3) conflict, and (4) group rivalry.** Yet by the very act of writing the words, Paul himself is rhetorically **fighting** against a **rival group** of Missionaries who are **competing** for the hearts and minds of his church members in Galatia. If it wasn't for **conflict**, we would not have most of Paul's letters! I say this because as you read the lists of moral and immoral behaviors this morning, remember, **God can turn even the thorns and thistles of selfish ambition into a crown of redemption.**

Paul was fighting for more than the hearts and minds of the Galatians; he was also worried about their foreskins. When Paul baptized the first Gentile members of the Galatian church, the Spirit of God inspired their faith and produced good fruit. That was good enough for Paul.

But after he resumed his missionary journey, a rival group of Christian missionaries showed up in Galatia and taught the Gentile Christians that they *must* follow Sabbath laws and *must* become circumcised in order to be "**real**" Christians. Paul caught wind of it and fired off a letter, cursing the rival missionaries. "**They want to circumcise you; I hope they castrate themselves!**" Paul writes in a verse that the lectionary choses to leave out. Paul argues against the other missionaries, *why are you burying these people* with your trivial cultural requirements when they have already demonstrated the fruits of the Spirit? **They have been buried with Christ in baptism and they are alive in the Spirit.** What more must they do?

There are many things that make a Christian a Christian. There are even more things that distinguish one kind of Christian from another. For Paul, **the most fundamental mark of a Christian is being buried with Christ in baptism.** We all need to be buried. St. Augustine, one of the early Church's premier theologians, wrote throughout the fourth and fifth centuries. Augustine imagined that the human will was curved in on itself so that human beings from the very beginning of life were only capable of self-love. Augustine called this curved state concupiscence. I call it being like a little selfish seed, curled into yourself so that all you can see is darkness and your own desire.

A church history professor explained it to me by telling a story about his toddler. **His little girl was eating cheerios and apple juice in her high chair** while he was unloading the dishwasher. He heard *a clunk and a clatter* behind his back and turned around to see his daughter's sippy cup lying on the floor. He picked it up and gave it back to his daughter. Just as he turned around, he heard *the clunk and clatter again*. The little girl grinned wryly as he picked it up a *second time*. My professor said he turned his back to his daughter for a brief moment and then swung around quickly to catch her in the act. *Clunk, clatter*. He watched as she threw the cup to the floor a *third* time, finally knocking off the lid and splattering juice everywhere.

We are kind of like little selfish seeds **that amuse ourselves by over-indulging in silly activities that inconvenience or at worst imperil others.** Like a toddler, our love of self-gratification can keep us from realizing how our behaviors are affecting other people or even harming our own bodies.

Nurturing this state of the human will is unfortunately lucrative. Corporations and institutions accumulate unspeakable amounts of wealth because the idea that we are *autonomous consumers entitled to personal happiness* is **enshrined** in our culture. In its most sinister form personal autonomy is presented as freedom. I think of the mayor of New York proposing a ban on soda's larger than 16oz. Given epidemic rates of **obesity, diabetes, and heart disease** in our nation caused in no small part by the proliferation of sugary drinks, it strikes me as a community-conscious policy intended to promote the welfare of society. Opponents argue, however, that the ban infringes on a person's "*freedom*" to choose. To be given the chance **to habitually indulge in excessive, detrimental self-gratification is not liberty, it is captivity.** An entity that would foster a person's sense of self-entitlement and disguise the pursuit of profit as a safeguard to personal freedom is not leading us to the Promised Land, but back into exile and bondage.

Freedom sprouts when little selfish seeds die to themselves and blossom for their neighbors.

The transformation starts with baptism. The question came up at POYC last week, what actually happens in baptism? Charlene grew up in the Catholic Church and recalled that infants had to be baptized to be saved. In baptism, the grace of God functions to fundamentally change the state of the baby. Baptism is a means of grace by which the concupiscent will of the child begins to be healed.

Some parents were more familiar with the Baptist tradition. In those traditions an adult baptism recognizes **a conscious choice to believe in Jesus,** forsake selfish desires, and walk the straight and narrow way. For Presbyterians, we remember God's covenant love for God's people. Baptism, in our tradition, recognizes **the primacy of God's promise and the importance of the community's faith** in the life of a child. For every Christian tradition there is another explanation of baptism. But the question remains what *happens* when little selfish seeds are buried with Christ and made alive in the Spirit?

I led a weeklong canoe trip for Middle School youth some time ago. It was a small group and we got to know one another quickly. From the very beginning I knew that **Jason and Kyle were the two I would have to keep an eye on.** They arrived at our launch site and immediately ran off to *horseplay by the creek*, letting their parents haul their packs out of the van. They examined all the canoes and *argued* about which

one was going to be theirs. It was all we could do as trip leaders to get them to join the group for introductions.

When it was finally time to cast off, the boys jumped into their assigned canoe. **Neither one wanted to get wet feet**, so they scotched the canoe off shore and in to deeper water. As the rest of the group slowly set out down the river, ***Kyle and Jason paddled in circles***. They both wanted to paddle on the right side and each refused to have it any other way. They had to be told to *cooperate*.

The trip continued and the boys struggled to keep up. We came to a wide portion of the river and some of the kids went swimming. ***Jason and Kyle arrived and were overcome with impatient enthusiasm***. Instead of docking the canoe, they each **stood up** in the canoe and got ready to dive in! *You don't stand up in a canoe!*

The boys and all their stuff went for a swim a little sooner than they had bargained for! They came up sputtering and spitting, a little embarrassed but no worse for wear. Jason swam after the bags and Kyle secured the canoe. Once they gathered their belongings, they pulled the canoe to shore. **Kyle got in first and Jason pushed off**. The rest of the day, they paddled together in silence.

The boys were **still a little damp** when we set up camp that night. We could hear their *shoes squish* as they huddled up around the campfire. The special activity for the evening was baking stick bread. **Stick bread is made by clumping a hunk of Bisquick batter around the knob of a two ~ three-inch round stick**. To cook stick bread, you hold the batter over the fire like you would a hotdog. **Jason** was baking his bread over the fire when **Kyle** hurried over to join him.

Stick bread, as simple as it is, requires *patience and attentiveness*. I think **Kyle** was a little rushed and as he swung his stick out over the fire, the batter started to slide. Kyle did his best to rescue his bread, turning his stick every which way to catch the running batter. But at last, **with a crackle and splat**, Kyle lost his bread into the flames.

This is when I recognized the baptism. As **Kyle** poked at his burning bread, **Jason removed his loaf from the end of his stick**.

He took the warm bread in his hands and he broke it.
And the two boys, with *river water in their ears*
and something different in their hearts,
shared bread together.

Freedom sprouts when little selfish seeds die to themselves and blossom for their neighbors.

Freedom lives when *the first tiny shoots of love* break through the cold ground of self-interest and stretch toward God.

Freedom grows when our lives blossom with the good fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

For freedom Christ has set us free, brothers and sisters;
 Therefore, love your neighbor as yourself.