

**“No Need for an Exocist”**  
**Galatians 5.22-26 (One Year Lectionary)**  
**Immanuel Lutheran Church, Sept 2020**

Visiting Christmas markets in Germany, we happened upon a Christmas scene like no other. The streets had been transformed into a forest. Decorated trees and overhead balm stretching from building to building gave the impression that Eden had been fused with the historic cityscape. The coming of Christ transformed the winter of the old creation into the summer of the new creation.

Even more remarkable was that it was all real. The smell of the trees and foliage was fantastic, some still had berries and, despite the winter season, ripe fruit hung from branches, making the decorations a full sensory experience.

Our hotel was nearby. As we approached it, we could see that we were in-store for more of the multi-sensory Christmas experience. The building, its walkway, lobby—the whole thing—was a profusion of nativity splendor with the same trees and branches. Or so we thought. As we passed through the scene, it struck us that it was all fake, everything. The whole thing was artificial. No smell, no real berries, no natural warmth. It was like a date with Cher. Nothing was real.

Now Paul has been making the contrast between “flesh” and “spirit” throughout this letter and he has been making it in all kinds of ways. Here he uses a pair of key words that highlight the disparity. He speaks of the “works of the flesh” in v.24 and contrasts them with the “fruit of the Spirit” in v.25. Compare those fake Christmas trees for a minute with ordinary, run-of-the-mill but real fruit trees in an orchard. The fake trees look great for a while, but then they get stuffed into the basement or dumped at the landfill. They’re fake. The fruit trees, however, may not look like a big deal just sitting out there on the side of the highway in some orchard, but if they’re properly cared for they will go on bearing fruit year after year. So which is more important? You hardly have to ask.

Underneath the two lists – the works of the flesh (“sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these”) and the other list, the fruit of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control), underneath these lists lies Paul’s whole vision of what happens to someone when they come, through the faith given in the preaching of the gospel and through the Word of God present in Holy Baptism, into the community of the Messiah’s people. These people, Paul insists in v.25, are the ones indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It’s the same point he made back in 4.4-7: the baptized are indwelt, “possessed” by the Holy Spirit or, perhaps better stated, possess the Holy Spirit within them. But even though the word of justification may have been declared about them at Baptism and even though God may have adopted them into His family through the same divine act, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they themselves have passed through the various stages to be observed about their new life in Christ. Being possessed by the Holy Spirit doesn’t mean you need an exorcism, it means you need to exercise the fruit of the new spirit within you.

We start off in the condition he calls the “flesh.” That’s the first stage. To be without the Holy Spirit is simply to be “in the flesh” and everybody is born that way. For Paul, that simply means that you are controlled/motivated by your natural self or anything else that is not of the Spirit of God. So he’s talking about people who are potentially the first generation of Christians, whether they are of Jewish or Gentile origins, both groups are born into human families, with ethnic, social, economic and territorial identities. When they live according to the standards of those things, when they are motivated to interpret and interact with the world based on those things, they’ll discover within themselves all kinds of desires, which if allowed will produce the “works of the flesh” listed in vv. 19-21. In other words, life outside of the Spirit is nothing less than a gravitation toward self-serving and strictly of-this-world identity-makers: race, class, status, sex-preference, power; a slouching

toward Gomorrah. Sounds contemporary, doesn't it? The only thing that can alter that is some other Spirit within you waging war against your corrupt dispositions.

The point Paul is getting at is the question: What possesses you – the flesh or God's Spirit? Because we live out that which drives us from within. Notice, however, that Paul doesn't say anything about being possessed by the devil like Regan MacNeil from *The Exorcist*. It isn't the devil or demon possession that drives us to sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness and things like that. It comes to us by nature: It's where our heart, habits, and rituals will lead us. The rule of law merely restrains it, and many times not. The law cannot and does not convert it.

Your biggest problem isn't the devil out there but the one staring back in the mirror: I am my biggest problem because when I am in a room by myself, I know exactly what kind of sinner I am and what I'm capable of. If my "flesh," my sinful nature, had full rein I'd stampede into Paul's list of vices. And you would too. That's the reality of biblical anthropology. And yet the human bent is to self-justify rather than confess it. Self-justification fails in the light of the law. The new horizon, as we are seeing today in march toward systemic self-justification over against the other, is the jettisoning of the law itself. But if we had mind-scanner that projected thoughts and dispositions on a wall for all to see, or (which is to say the same thing) if we could peruse your browser history, then fallenness universalizes, with the law condemning.

A glance back at that list of the works of the flesh will reveal that a society in which most people behaved in that way is unlikely to be a virtuous or thriving place – certainly not a place of giving but of taking, not of love but lust, not of self-sacrifice but selfishness. Narcissism, immaturity, and the force of law would be its foremost traits. What is more, when God finally establishes His kingdom (so antithetical to all of that), people like that will have no place in it because Jesus turns freaks into

normal people; he makes those who are crazy about those kinds of things, seated, well-dressed in their right minds. Those “born of the flesh are flesh but those born of the Spirit are spirit.” And you see, that is the way out of the insanity of ourselves, our skin color, politics, our possessions — get possessed by another spirit, the Holy Spirit. And to be born of the Spirit is to be baptized into the life of Christ and made a new creation: this is how the love of Christ compels you – by way of the fruit of the Spirit changing our motives from the insanity of the flesh.

The church is not the place where the flesh rules, but the Spirit. This is why Paul states in v.21: “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” You, however, have been plunged into a God’s kingdom where the Lord of the kingdom reigns by the real deal – the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Only this triumphs over the human spirit and the spirit of the times.

Through the announcement of the gospel of Jesus and in the waters of Holy Baptism, God’s Holy Spirit goes to work and people are renewed (children included). The first sign of that renewal, and hence the true badge of their belonging to God’s established earthly kingdom—the Church—is the faith they express in Jesus as the risen Lord. Notice how that works: the proclamation of the Word of God and the personal application of God’s Word in Baptism is not, in the first instance, purposed as toward the art of persuasion; as if the orator’s rhetorical flourish and argumentative force has the power to regenerate a soul. The word of God is the sword of the Holy Spirit; not my sword or anyone else’s. Only the Spirit has power to convert. One must be altered by the Spirit, indwelt by the Spirit in order to give rise to an expression of faith. Your profession of faith is post-facto. The Spirit gives it; we have a new and different Spirit that avails against the flesh to say that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Salvation is, from first to last, the gracious work of God – what a relief that is! In this way our membership in the Household of God involves a movement through death to new life, from flesh to Spirit – Paul says so in Romans 6:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

<sup>12</sup> Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. <sup>13</sup> Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. <sup>14</sup> For sin will have no dominion over you....

What's left behind in this death, with our being crucified with Christ when united to Him in baptism, is the life in which "the flesh" determines who one is and now one behaves. The dominion of the law, the law of our nature, is broken.

Instead, having been born of the Spirit, you begin to "bear fruit". The nine qualities Paul insists are not things which, if we try hard enough, we could simply do without the Holy Spirit. If you suspect that someone who is being kind to you is having to try very hard to do it, then doesn't the kindness itself lose its flavor? The inner motivation is not love but the requirement to be nice, for whatever reason: political correctness, outside pressures, tolerance ethics, statues, obligations. Whatever it is, you sense the disingenuousness, that their kindness is contrived and therefore

hollow, vacuous, meaningless — just like the overbilled and over-reach of social ethics. It's contrived, confected. The point of all of nine dimensions of the fruit of the Spirit is that when the Spirit is at work these virtues begin to happen; new motivations appear and then, of course, you begin to discover who you really are, into whom you have been remade or, better, repossessed: conformed to the likeness of Christ, true sons and daughters of God.

This word "fruit" in v.22 is in the singular, giving a cohesive and unified character to what the Spirit produces – the deeds of God. The fruit of the Spirit is one—just as the works of Christ are of one piece—and therefore the fruit of the Spirit is indivisible, yet all flowing from the first virtue mentioned, love. Love is not one characteristic of the Christian life which can be numbered alongside many others; it is inherent in what it means to be led by the Spirit and thus the quintessence of life "in Christ." So if you are not manifesting love to God, to neighbor, to yourself, then I'm wondering what kind of spirit possesses you. Sometimes neighbors need only look at the stickers on your car or the posts you retweet on your feed to know.

This list serves an important function. If there are those in the Galatian congregations, as well as right here, who have been carried away by some other than the Holy Spirit inspired motive for their behavior toward one another resulting in conflict and division between the brethren, then this list calls them back to the fundamental activity of God in human lives – enabling us to love one another as ourselves. It seems so mundane and unremarkable but is there anything more fantastic than—when your flesh shouts you have rights, go get yours, 'to hell with them'—that you forgive, you love, you rejoice, you have peace. You get the picture and it is so unlike the flesh, so unlike the world of takers and exploiters, of power-players and posers.

This multi-dimensional single fruit of the Spirit contains, beyond the gift of love, a striking number of terms which have about them the mark of restraint and

steadiness over against self-exertion. Where the flesh may want to play the part of vigilante, the Spirit manifests kindness; where you'd otherwise have emotional incontinence, the Spirit manifest self-control; where you'd like to be anxious and overwhelmed, the Spirit engenders peace and patience. While love embraces joy, it must also cope with the ordinary and the ugly, with the arrogant and the ill-tempered. Let's face it, life in a close-knit community is never easy, and the promise here is that Holy Spirit will bring those specific qualities of love which make for well-being and peace, while the world out there riots, cuts-throats, and imposes law.

Not, of course, that this process bypasses our thinking and willing. We have to set our minds and intentions to do them; it isn't a matter of just relaxing and doing what comes naturally. It isn't "just let go and let God," like you switch on autopilot or something. Otherwise Paul wouldn't need to urge the Galatians in v.25 to "get in line with the Spirit" – start walking by the Spirit, that is, line up the thoughts, words, and deeds of your life to see the effect the Spirit can produce. And now, by your own moral reflection and effort, let the motivation and power of the Holy Spirit have its complete way. The upshot is that when these qualities appear, with all their quiet joy mostly during the mundane stretches of life, all their rich contribution to the sort of community God intends and will eventually produce, they come like the fruit of an ordinary orchard, not the spectacle of a fake Christmas tree or hypocrites who talk the talk but do not walk (in line with the Spirit). In other words, don't expect the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to be like manifested like the demons. The Holy Spirit possession isn't like that. It's like, well, loving the otherwise unlovable; being joyful amidst adversity; having peace when there's reason for anxiety.

This fruit truly becomes a part of who we will have become in Christ: hence, we talk about Charles's faith, Elizabeths's kindness, Stephanie's patience, Tim's joy. When the Spirit of God enters you, His fruit becomes really yours because He is really yours ontologically, motivationally, savingly.

The list also serves an important function in providing criteria for discerning the Spirit's presence. Hypocrites, the fake trees, will ultimately prove loveless of one type of person or another. When backs are turned, then out comes the bigotry, hate, bad-mouthing. Lord, I hope not, because this is precisely how the Holy Spirit is distinguished from human spirits that are driven and motivated by the pressures of political correctness conformity: The descriptive marks of love for the other, as your brother from another mother, document the Spirit's presence in your life. If your so-called "Spirit-led" thoughts, words, and deeds end in needless strife, jealousy, dissension, or even isolation—little to no interaction with your brothers and sisters in here—then it is a safe bet that the Spirit has had nothing to do with it. Thus, this passage provides an excellent picture of what true Christian life looks like – it looks like the kingdom of God, where the Lord reigns within His people through the Holy Spirit bringing about the realities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, right here, right now.

Immanuel Lutheran Church hear the call to live like a people possessed by a Spirit of love, because, well, you are. Amen.