

(Psalms 77:11, 12, 15, 16, 20 NRSV) (Call to Worship)

¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old. ¹² I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.

¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah ¹⁶ When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled.

²⁰ You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

(Galatians 5:1, 13-25 NRSV)

¹ For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

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. ²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

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Live By the Spirit

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-25.

The spirit and the flesh are opposed to each other to keep you from doing what you want, says Paul. He also says that the freedom he has found, and that is available to all of us, in Christ ought not be seen as an opportunity for self-indulgence.

To keep you from doing what you want. Not an opportunity for self-indulgence. With a message like that, is it any wonder that the church has gone into decline?

*** Charles Merrill is the benefactor of a fellowship program at Harvard for practicing ministers. As the head of the program, I get to meet with Charles at least twice a year. He usually comes to the chapel service on the days he comes to the school. After listening to the sermon, he is fond of asking me on the way to lunch if I think sermons preached at Harvard will play in Peoria. Charles is a maverick in the family of Merrill Lynch fame, and an educator himself, so he is poking a little fun at the ivy halls of Harvard. I think he's asking if the university is relevant to average America.

But there is a different way of hearing his question, which turns the tables, and has more real bite to it. That question is, how does the preached Christian Gospel play in Peoria, wherever it's preached from? That is, how does a message that says you shouldn't do what you want and that self-indulgence is a problem preach in Peoria, or anywhere else in the United States of America? Rather poorly, I should think.

We are the land of do what you want. We are the land of self-indulgence. Of course, some people sound as if they are against these things, but listen carefully to them before you make up your mind.

Tom Paxton, the ageless songwriter, once wrote a song called, "I Want to Change My Name to Chrysler." This goes back a little ways, to the days when Lee Iacoca was about to become a household personality. Chrysler motors was on the verge of bankruptcy, and the federal government decided that the right thing to do was to bail out the motor company. Tom Paxton, thought to himself, maybe if I change my name to Chrysler, the government will bail me out, too.

Not too many years afterwards the federal government was at it again, bailing out failing savings and loans institutions. Tom Paxton could have written another song, "I Want to Change My Name to First Federal."

And yet, among Chrysler Motors management people, among bankers, and among those in congress who voted the bailouts, you would find strong sentiment against welfare. And why? Well, it would sound a lot like Paul. They would say that life isn't about getting what you want. It's not about self-indulgence. They would have added that life is about

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accountability, and if you manage your life so poorly as to need a bailout, I mean welfare, then you should pay the price.

The difference here is that Chrysler management, bankers and congressional representatives are not adversely affected by withholding welfare. They are very much adversely affected if a major corporation or a banking industry fails.

The point of this digression is this: look out when you hear that people in America are against doing what you want and against self-indulgence. If you scratch the surface even just a little, you will find they are usually against someone else's desire to do what they want or to be self-indulgent. It is usually someone else's character that needs building or someone else's desires that need to be reigned in. When it comes to their wants and self-indulgence, they're very much for them.

Make no mistake about it, doing what you want and self-indulgence are the icons of American society. The conservatives sound the clarion for morality, but they are picky about what they abhor. They abhor out-of-the-ordinary sexuality, they abhor handouts (at least to poor people), they abhor affirmative action, but predatory business policies they describe as the free-market economy, which has the double advantage of sounding like nobody could be against it and sounding as if it is a force of its own acting with no human input – the free market, does it really happen by itself?

And liberals are no better. They abhor anyone trampling on rights, they abhor unfairness and injustice, they deplore social ills, but the minute someone else's rights conflict with theirs, the minute fixing the societal ills they abhor looks like it will really fall on their shoulders, be prepared for a broadside of "preserving the neighborhood" and "protecting the public good," and other such virtuous sounding euphemisms which really mean, "I'm protecting mine. I'm making sure I get what I want. I'm taking care of myself."

In this morning's passage from Galatians Paul has taken dead aim at the human propensity for self-gratification and self-indulgence. In every segment of US society self-gratification and self-indulgence have become religion and patriotism all rolled into one. They are carefully couched in language to make them sound benign, even admirable, to be sure, but underneath, they are self-gratification and self-indulgence, and they are as American as apple pie.

With a message like Paul's, which calls us to account for using our enormous freedom for doing what we want and for self-interest, it is perfectly understandable why so many people have lost interest in the church. In some ways the church is so out of touch with society that its message, as Paul has given it this morning, is the exact opposite of what many people hold dear, and even the exact opposite of what they say their religion tells them. Symptomatic of this is what we discovered in the sermon a couple of weeks ago: the Bible doesn't say what a lot of people think it does, nor does it say what they want it to.

But Paul does start this morning's reading with a defense of freedom. He says do not submit to the yoke of slavery, by which he means, do not submit to a religion of rules and regulations. Paul is perhaps the all-time greatest defender of freedom from rules and regulations. Largely, I think he understands that rules and regulations can be so manipulated that the most selfish and spiteful person can follow certain rules and be made

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to look righteous. Following rules and regulations may guarantee little about a person's character. Neither may it assure the satisfactoriness of a person's life.

In the end, these are the things in which Paul thinks we should be interested. What is your character like? How satisfactory is your life? Many of us may be able to side-step the first question. For many pretense and rationalization easily enough substitute for character. Though, I venture, that's not as easy to keep up in the long run as it sounds. But the second question is even more haunting. How satisfactory is your life? Indeed, that one is apt to haunt us. It is apt to haunt us, because, at the end of the day, getting what we want, fully engaging our self-indulgence fails to deliver on its promise. It comes up empty. It is shallow and leaves us hollow and empty. Self-indulgence, ironically, doesn't lead to any real personal satisfaction.

Never before in history has a nation or society built individual freedom and interest, self-indulgence, so much into its ethos, into its stated dream, into its very self-definition and fabric. And never before in history has there been a people whose wealth and opportunity have allowed them, or at least many of them, to achieve this goal of freedom for self-indulgence. And yet, all this having what we want, all this unfettered self-indulgence has failed to make us content. It has, indeed, been coincident with the highest divorce, suicide, and violence rates in history.

Clearly, we are missing something. Paul says that a life lived in the Spirit stands opposed to what he calls the desires of the flesh. I'm not sure that I like the way this distinction seems to divide the world, spirit and flesh. It betrays its Greek origins, to which we owe an unfortunate separation of body and mind, or body and spirit. It has, also, probably led us to too Puritan a notion of things like sex. More important for our purposes here, it fails to capture what Paul is really after. I take it that what Paul wants to really get at is the distinction between a mature way of relating to the world and an immature one. It is the distinction between a way on the one hand which takes the whole, including consequences and other people, into account and a way on the other hand which blindly grasps after amusements and apparent pleasures, disregarding anything or anyone else.

Paul puts in this latter list such things as "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." These are all unconsidered and immature activities, activities which at their worst can cause great harm to ourselves and others, and even at their best leave us empty. Listen to them: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing." They are all things that on the surface and at certain moments have magnetic appeal. No doubt, we have all known the power of their spell. But in every case their appeal is deceptive and hollow.

On the other hand, Paul's list of what he calls things of the Spirit are, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control." Very often the practice of the things on this list is difficult. Very often they run against the grain of what we want to do. I have seldom heard anyone say how they just love to be patient. It takes work. Most of these things take maturity. They are certainly not things we are likely to grasp after, as the things on the first list are. "Love (in its fullest sense), joy, peace,

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patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control,” these are certainly very different from licentiousness, jealousy, anger and carousing. They don’t have that narcotic-like magnetism. But at the end of the day, they deliver on the promise of a satisfactory and satisfying life.

Paradoxically, while they grant us a satisfactory and satisfying life, the things on this list of things of the Spirit, almost to a one, imply treating others well, also. The things on this list, while leading us to happiness, point beyond ourselves. Paul says that there is really a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” For most people it sounds like a sacrificial ethic, which takes us back to the beginning point: it’s hard for the real and rightful message of the church to get a hearing among those bent on self-indulgence. Except. Except, sooner or later one may discover that loving yourself and loving your neighbor are really the same thing, that you really can’t do one without doing the other. Self-love and self-indulgence are at opposite ends of the spectrum.

It is the greatest paradox of all. “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control” are the ingredients in the recipe of a satisfactory and satisfying life, the ingredients of loving yourself, and yet at first glance, to the uninitiated, to the immature they look like a recipe for sacrifice, for forgoing a satisfactory life.

But living by the Spirit is a call to not living by the first glance, because the first glance is rarely reliable. Living by the Spirit is a call to a deeper understanding of the workings of life. Living by the Spirit is a call to exercise the love, wisdom and self-control that a satisfactory life and true happiness requires.

It’s not a very glitzy message. It may have a hard time playing Peoria, or any other part of an America consumed by acquisitiveness and greed. A life lived in the Spirit cuts against a lot of what you hear.

But a life lived in the Spirit delivers what we all really want, what we are all striving for, even when we go about it all wrong. A life lived in the Spirit delivers a satisfactory and satisfying life, a life as Paul says, that is marked by joy and peace. Once you taste these delights, once a life lived in the Spirit gets its hold on you, it won’t let you go. More important, a life lived in the Spirit won’t let you down.

Do not use your freedom to choose an ill-considered self-indulgence. As Paul says, you will, in so doing, devour one another. Use your freedom to choose a life in the Spirit. For there you have seat at the endless banquet where the feast leads not to gluttony, and where the meal leaves you eternally satisfied. This is the banquet which is ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.