

The Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity Gal. 5:13ff Lk. 17:11ff

+In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Many years ago in a universe far, far away I fancied myself as a budding musician of sorts; a violinist in fact. So with instrument and bow in one hand, a long stack of etude and scale books in the other, I set off to conquer the world of classical music. Fortunate to find a very skilled and accomplished master of the violin and viola, I began a very long and arduous journey. As I recall I was relegated to the basement by my spouse in order to practice, because, according to her words, “the sound of an animal in pain was too much to bear”! Days turned to months and months to years in an attempt to make music. But finally the time arrived when the sound wasn’t half bad and the fingers actually put the instrument in tune. The teacher assigned a beautiful and challenging Concerto by the “Red Haired Priest”, Antonio Vivaldi. Apparently writing music was a more joyful occupation than being a priest! You may think you do not know that name, but his music appears everywhere; in advertisements, hidden in popular music, and even on those dreadful baseball park organs. He is perhaps best known for his set of suites, The Four Seasons. So I was given the role of soloist among a group of string players and off we went. Days of practice were spent on each section of the concerto until it was memorized. Now one thing should be noted here. Being a soloist may sound very romantic, BUT, it also means there is no where to hide!! A missed note will not curl up next to someone else’s playing. The day of rehearsal arrived and off we went. But about half way through the first movement the director stopped us, turned to me, and asked, “What are you doing”? “Playing this piece”, I replied. “I can see that” was the rejoinder. “What I mean is why are you playing each aspect as if they were all just alike”? Where is the rise and fall of intensity, the joy and the sadness, the flow that runs throughout this whole work”? Vivaldi was not bored when he wrote this, are you? Where is the HEART if the music? So much for that career!!!!!!

In a very real sense the very same thing could be said of St. Paul’s words to the Galatians in our first lesson today. As usual he fires off a letter with words tumbling one after the other, at times with hardly a moment to catch a breath. Our tendency is to read it as one long continuous diatribe about sin, yet there are movements and subtleties throughout his comments. He refers back to Leviticus and the Law, babbles on with a listing of misdeeds, and even uses sarcasm, when he suggest that not actually eat one another if they are going to insist on fighting. But the overarching question is this, what is the heart of his instruction? What is it that holds his comments together as a whole; in short, what is the theme running thru the whole? It is this one thing—**that the Christian life is a life of conflict and struggle where we see our place on the journey, and the quality of our lives, in the choices we make.** Each of us are soloists from time to time in the midst of a symphony we call the Church, the Body of Christ.

The Galatians were really not different from our own era. They had entered the faith and now found that it did not make life a piece of cake. They were still very human with all the frailties, mistakes, broken relationships and hurts they had had before. They jockeyed for position, envied others, resented neighbors, and disagreed to the point of violent encounters. The very fabric of the community was beginning to tear. How had they come to this point after such a hopeful start? They had misread Paul’s comments “that for freedom Christ has set you free”. No longer in bondage to sin they assumed they could do as they felt inclined without restriction or self-

discipline. Does this have a familiar ring or does it sound like any culture you know? And what was the answer to the darkness they experienced in themselves and one another? They fell prey to an age old enemy—the belief that if one thing isn't working then the exact opposite must be the target. So they thought they could re-instate the Torah, the Law, and get rid of the conflict and tension in life. It is the illusion that if we put enough rules, policies, and procedures in place we can eliminate we eliminate ambiguity in life. That may well work for small children, but not for mature and free adults. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian once said, "It is infinitely easier to live (suffer), in obedience to a human command than in the freedom of our own responsibility". We would sometimes rather NOT have the choices and options available to us. We would rather be "off the hook" in terms of having to make decisions, or prefer our decisions reign supreme. You see Paul was right when he said Christ has set us free from bondage to sin and death, but with that freedom comes another daunting task which is responsible exercise of freedom. God does not take away our choices. He does not box in life to the point where everyone must do the right things, because they have no other options. Instead he gives us the means and the tools to deal with those choices, which are present everyday and in every moment. The Christian life is not escape from our human nature, but rather being pitched into the deep end of the pool with the resources to engage that nature.

Paul's way of describing this tension and conflict is to say that the flesh and the Spirit are at battle for our souls. By this he is not suggesting that the body is evil. He is saying that life lived without reference to God, driven by self-centered hungers is a constant threat. It is the dilemma of living with one theme in the symphony—pursuing what the "I" wants without reference to the consequences for self or others. It may be pleasure, possessions, status, comfort, or a myriad of other objects we believe we cannot live without. But one crucial measure is whether we are miserable or joyless when we don't get them, and if so they are probably not lasting or worthy of our calling in Christ.

Paul points to the other side of this tension as the answer. It is not removal of the temptations to serve self or adopting a new Law of virtues. The tension in life remains! Instead he uses an odd phrase. He says we are to walk in the Spirit. Many people focus on the word-Spirit, but a real key here is the word walk. (peripateo in Greek) It means that the Christian life is not destination but an ongoing journey. It is a daily taking up the conflict with ourselves and seeing those in light of the cross. It is as Luther said to drown the old Adam daily not by our own efforts alone, but by recalling the deep, endless, and abiding love God has for us, and allowing that to be the point of reference for all of life. To walk in the Spirit of Christ is to choose love rather than self. It is to ask of every moral struggle or life dilemma, will taking this path rather than another lead to peace and joy or will it leave others and myself harmed in some way? It is to realize we will sometimes take two steps forward and three back. It may seem strange to us to speak of being commanded to love. We think of love as a warm, good feeling that just happens as if by chance. Can you imagine me commanding my daughter to love this person rather than that one? How would that go over? But in our faith we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves and are even told it is the fulfilling of the whole of the intention of the Law. Why? Because Christian love is not just a feeling, but a choice to walk with God rather than around Him. It is a choice to act in a way that may be the opposite of our natural inclination, but freedom in Christ allows us to do just that. To walk in the Spirit is to live consciously in each moment and to be mindful that Christ is both for

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me and in me, allowing me to make choices, but always pointing to those which will love my neighbor as I am loved by Him.

The Christian life is not one of absolute ease tinged by freedom from struggle and conflict. But it is a journey undertaken with a partner—Christ. It is a life of constant movement and growth, sometimes frightening and at others awe inspiring. It is a life God invites to go on with him freely and in that freedom we are allowed to discover richness we could never create for ourselves.

Amen+