

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+

A week ago, a book arrived at the house sent by my mother, which happened to be written by my spouse’s favorite author, Louise Penny. It was the long awaited 12th in a series, and at nearly 450 pages the book was consumed in just over a day and a half. Like most of her works, it is a mystery novel and as with any skillfully produced mystery it has twists, turns, and substantial tension in the story. That tension and conflict, whether between two apparently differing conclusions or two characters, is at least part of what makes reading works like this so exciting and just fun. We may like to solve the unexplained, but no one wants to know the ending before you even start. That would remove the energy out of the whole enterprise. While we may prefer predictability in general, uncertainty and ambiguity are real and can enrich us, as well as lead us to face challenges in how we will live.

Let’s consider one example of this in the world around us. In the field of particle physics ‘not knowing’ is a daily challenge. Particle physics is the study of the very small, of the subatomic, of quarks and muons and other strange sounding things. It is focused on odd phenomena like the fact that some particles are energy and then matter and then energy and we don’t really know how they do this. One of the most perplexing aspects of this field is the fact that scientists can either measure the speed of a particle OR the position, but not both!! It isn’t that our equipment is not advanced enough or that our capacity to know is weak that makes this so. Rather it is inherent in the makeup of creation. There is a limit to human knowledge, and it is outside our capacity to control. It has been named “the Uncertainty Principle”. It appears the Universe is free to operate without full disclosure to us poor mortals! We live with uncertainty.

This morning we come face to face with this reality in the Christian life as Paul articulates it in one of his earliest, and frankly, more complex epistles-Galatians. While it may appear worlds away from our everyday life, it is much closer than you may think! Paul draws out the tensions between freedom and responsibility; between life lived naturally as we humans are inclined to do—the flesh--perpetuating centuries of self-focused behavior, and life lived out as those set free by Christ—free to participate in living a different and far healthier way. The Collect for this day captures where we are headed. “That we may obtain that which Thou dost promise, make us to love that which Thou dost command.” Paul pull no punches when he says that we who have been set free from sin now have a vocation to love, and there are no easy outs or loopholes provided. In this season after Trinity, when we consider what it is to live out of our faith, this is a potent epistle.

St. Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set you free, only do not let this become an opportunity for the flesh.” What he means is this: Christ has redeemed us, and by His grace has made us free from the power of sin. Nothing we do or say makes that happen as the Gospel lesson of the lepers clearly shows. Even those who were not grateful are healed. With the freedom Christ bestows comes an awesome responsibility, namely, CHOICES in a conflicted world. You and I are not defined by what we amass in this life, our genealogy, pedigree, intelligence or social status, our careers or plans, but rather by the choices we make.

The Galatians were battling with the tension between flesh and its limits and Spirit which brings freedom and responsibility. They found this overwhelming and some wanted to go to the Jewish Law and follow that in order to get certitude. They were 1st century fundamentalists. That is one

of the great dilemmas of human existence. So often we would rather someone or something become an absolute authority and tell us exactly how to act. We clamor for freedom but fear its weight and accountability. As Bonhoeffer commented, “It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than in the freedom of our own responsibility.”

Others in the conflicted community decided, “Hey, since I am free, anything goes”, meaning I can just rely on Christ's good will and ignore my own foibles. These were 1st century libertines whose motto was, “I want all the fun of life with none of the consequences. God is good and I can ignore the rest.” Both perspectives are signs of an *impaired* faith life. When St. Paul warns about the FLESH he is not denigrating our bodies or any aspect of God's creation. He is referring to life viewed without faith in God's purposes; life lived as if our relationship with God did not exist; in short, living with the delusion that the temporal will suffice. He could have just as well been writing today. His description of Galatia, hidden in the words he chooses, portrays the same context in which you and I seek to be faithful. We fight with a world that seeks to live without reference to God and attempts to draw us into the same ravine, or with people whose certitude is go locked they will remove the freedom of others to live by faith. It is not only outside and around us that such perspectives close in, but at times inside us. We too, are beset by these temptations. Paul holds up a mirror for us to gaze into with his partial list of unfaithful acts. The is not all inclusive. He calls us to examine daily our motives and actions in light of Christ's gift of love, so that we can have the courage to see ourselves as we really are and to receive the faith God creates, and then live out of it even when it is hard. Paul knew how easy it is to fall into delusion.

When I was a small boy, I was allowed to stay up late one night per week. At least it seemed late when I was 8 or 9. I chose Friday evening because Rod Serling's Twilight Zone aired. Every week I would watch it and be scared out of my wits, and every following week I returned to view it again. One episode which remains clear in memory is of a young, handsome, stylish young man visiting a town and staying in a boarding house. He makes friends easily, impresses others with wit and wisdom, and is admired. The town is idyllic, being both quaint and beautiful. He enters a small establishment to have lunch and finds left on the table a set of eyeglasses with tinted lenses. Written over the nose piece is the Latin, Veritas or Truth. Something strange happens when he puts them on. His view of the town changes from lovely to decrepit. The voices of those speaking to him reflected jealousy, envy, and dislike. Shaken he removes them and goes back to his room, but on the way up the stairs he stops to gaze into a mirror and placing the glasses on he sees himself not as young and attractive, but under the influence of decay and death. It was a sobering program no doubt reflective of the Portrait of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde.

Paul knows the things that can delude us, and he asks us to be honest enough to peer into the mirror and see how easy it is to take God and one another for granted. But he does not leave us there. Instead he invites us to consider one thing and one thing only; the LOVE God has for the world. “The whole of the Law can be summed up in one word, love your neighbor as yourself”. Paul intentionally puts our freedom in terms of being servants or slaves of the Spirit; the source of love. The first verse of our lesson could rightly be translated, “Walk in the Spirit, and then you will not live after the flesh.” This is the answer for our struggles with flesh. The spiritual life always brings warfare because it challenges any way which puts us at the center of life and focuses on our wants. True love focuses on the well-being of another. To walk in the Spirit is not to simply some pious expression. Rather it is to throw ourselves upon Christ because he has loved us more than we can either love or care for ourselves. For St. Paul and for us, to walk this way is

to become a channel of divine love. It isn't something we create, but it is a gift from God. Look at the list in verse 22 and see which gift of the Spirit is listed first. The most certain way our choices in life can transcend our fear of freedom is to ask whether they would reflect the love God has given to us personally; by what they produce. Every time in the Eucharist when the priest holds up the broken body and blood and says to us, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world", we are receiving a visual and actual gift from God about our ultimate value to HIM. I have two granddaughters, Madelyn who is 16 and Samantha who is 14. And I can say to you with all the clarity in my heart and mind that I would not willingly give them up for anything this earth has to offer. Yet my love for them pales in comparison to God's love for us. We have been set free from the power of sin and death, but that freedom calls us to be slaves of Christ and the only way to protect that freedom is to choose love. Love which holds the other as dearly as we hold ourselves. Love, which is no mere emotion, but is willing to sacrifice. Love which leads us away from one-sided relationships to embrace others with something they may not get anywhere else. You my brothers and sisters in Christ have been called not to fear or serve the flesh but to freedom. Freedom to choose love. That is the mystery of the faith and the answer to the tension life brings. As Christ is the center of our worship may he also be the center of every whisper, every hope, every act. Amen+