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St. James', Mt. Airy
6/26/16

Proper 8C
2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14
Psalm 77:1-2,11-20
Galatians 5:1,13-25
Luke 9:51-62

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Once upon a time I taught 7th & 8th grade at St. Thomas the Apostle Roman Catholic School in Hyde Park, on the south side of Chicago.

Teaching in a school that encompassed PreK through 8th grade was not what I anticipated when I began my teaching career – in fact even though I was certified to teach grades 6-12, I really only wanted to teach High School. I initially took a one-year contract teaching Middle School at STA as I was waiting for my license to transfer from Indiana to Illinois.

But, I found that Middle School was my teaching sweet spot, and stayed on – in part because I loved the way my Middle Schoolers took their leadership at this combined-age school so seriously. There was a palpable sense of community and responsibility toward one another that I have rarely found so strong elsewhere.

One of the traditions for 8th graders was a series of events and celebrations leading up to their graduation. And a part of those was the discernment of what gift of the Spirit each graduate most clearly possessed – and then recognition of it, publically.

Eileen Edwards, the Master teacher whom I was partnered with, would pull together a small group of students every spring and sit down and pray with them. And then they would pray about each person in the class, and discern together what fruit of the Spirit they saw in them.

I LOVED this tradition – and so did the students, who every year waited excitedly for their certificate and the revealing of what was seen in them.

It's a practice I've turned to from time to time, not very formally, but in my musings. After a conversation with someone I will reflect that they possess generosity, or joy. I'll observe someone reaching out to another member of the community with kindness or love. Sometimes when praying with others I will feel the sense of peace that emanates from someone in particular. These are all fruits of the Spirit.

And it applies to communities as well – whether thinking about which of these fruits are mostly clearly present in a given community, or whether you're asking the important question of whether **this** community is can be said to be characterized by *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*.

This is all well and good, **and**, I think there is more to take away from Paul's letter to the Galatians than just these fruits by themselves.

Because Paul sets these fruit of the Spirit up in opposition to the works of the flesh. I don't want to focus on the dichotomy between Spirit and flesh he images here, so much as the opposition between sin and virtue.

Because all of the things he lists as works of the flesh – *fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these* – are ultimately sinful in that they draw us away from right relationship with one another, and with God.

Sin is a double-edged sword in that it cuts both ways – both the one who sinning, and those around them. But ultimately sin always creates loneliness – it isolates.

Paul knew this, which is why he warned against using the freedom found in the grace and love of God as free ticket to self-indulgence.

Instead he called the community in Galatia **into** community – bidding them to become slaves to one another through love.

This language is problematic for us as inheritors of a society founded with, and on, chattel slavery. But the essence is pure.

We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be responsible for each other, to – as Thomas Merton said – love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.

This is where virtue comes in. Virtues are things that draw us together, connect and bind us to one another, and to God.

Paul calls them fruits of the Spirit in this letter. The gift of these virtues is that they help us individually, and collectively, move out of sin – and into the love of God.

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Anger makes us lash out and push others away, but *self-control* helps us build relationship.

Idolatry takes our attention and focuses it on things which are ultimately empty of life, while *faithfulness* takes the gift of faith God has given us, and responds with wholeheartedness.

Envy is like a fog in which what we have becomes lost, and all we can see is what others possess, while *generosity* sees what we have, and the ways in which it can become more, when it is broken and shared.

These lists of words Paul wrote all those centuries ago still have power **for** us today, because they still have power **over** us – for good and for ill.

The brokenness and divisiveness we see in the world today are directly caused by these sins.

As the quote sometimes attributed to John Greens goes: People were created to be loved. Things were created to be used. The reason why the world is in chaos is because things are being loved and people are being used.

Paul called this biting and devouring one another.

But it is not our only choice, it is never our only choice.

Jesus again and again through his life, death, and resurrection continued to offer a love so big it embraces the whole of creation.

And today, in our day, with all the forces of the world that are trying to pull us apart, trying to divide us and make us see each other as **other** instead of community, we will, as the scripture says, be known by **our love**.

Those who choose, even on a small scale, to love in the midst of hatred and fear are the people who offer true hope to the world.¹

So choose to be hope. Choose love over fear. Choose one another over isolation.

And more to the point: Go out into the world and

BE hope, BE love, BE community.

BE the hands and hearts of Christ in the world, this day and every day.

~ AMEN ~

¹ Henri Nouwen.