

Psalm 16 ~ Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Learning to Fly

3rd Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ June 26, 2022

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Introduction

I will begin my introduction to our Galatians reading with a Trivial Pursuit question to get us on the runway to something not so trivial. Here's the question: Who wrote these lyrics?

*A soul in tension that's learning to fly
Condition grounded but determined to try
Can't keep my eyes from the circling skies
Tongue-tied and twisted, just an earth-bound misfit, I*

Anybody? Yes! Any fans of the 1960's English rock band Pink Floyd got it. They wrote these lyrics to their song titled, "Learning to Fly." While probably *not* what they had in mind when writing this song, surely the Galatians to whom Paul wrote this letter was a community "*in tension that's learning to fly.*" You may recall from last Sunday, the impetus for Paul's Letter to the churches in Galatia (written about 50 CE) was his passionate corrective to get the Galatians back on the flight path of Christ's call to discipleship. They were struggling with all kinds of dissension, factions and conflicts, sinking down into fights about what rules and regulations they were supposed to be following now that they were Jews who were following Christ.

Everyone had an opinion among this beautifully and richly diverse group of folks who were trying to learn how to love one another: Jews, Greeks, slaves and free, people of all genders trying to become one in Christ Jesus. But who was right and who was wrong? If they were no longer bound by the 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible in the same way as they were before Christ came, how could they know they were on the right path, the path of life? Navigating primarily by the winds of the Holy Spirit was a new way to be people of faith. Hard then and hard now. Just as it was for the Galatians, so true for us today. The threat of change; the loss of our status and station as we know it strikes terror in our hearts, raw and rancorous. It mires our feet in the mud. Earth-bound indeed.

Good time to listen up to Paul's good news then and now for all of us earth-bound misfits. In Christ, we are given freedom from sin. And freedom to fly by the Holy Spirit. A call made possible through Christ. There is hope. Wings await. We begin our reading today with the very apex of Paul's entire rant, Chapter 5, verse 1, where he might as well have been shouting.

Sermon

Back when we were raising our daughters, Emily and Hannah, who are now thirtysomethings we first learned this truth; and now that our eldest granddaughter Isabel is four years old, we have been reminded all over again: children are natural born lawyers. I say this because of their expert ability to manipulate to their liking any and every rule we as parents might establish. For instance,

Parent: "I told you not to sing that song anymore."

Child: "I was only *humming* it!"

Parent: "I told you not to eat the raw cookie dough."

Child: "I wasn't eating the dough, I was *licking* it."

Child to Parent: It wasn't my fault because I was playing ball in the house. I didn't break the lamp: the *ball* did it!"

Early this Spring, when our roll-a-dock was still rolled up on the shore and not in the water, one day our 4-year-old Isabel came to visit. As soon as she caught sight of it, she started running toward it, as though it were an unusual but intriguing climbing structure in a playground. Her mom, Emily, sternly told her, "Isabel: You may not play on the dock! It's not in the water so it is off limits." About an hour later, she and I glance out the window and there she is playing on the dock with Grandpa Bob. Izzy justified this move quickly and easily, "Mom only said I couldn't play on it *by myself*." As Emily likes to say, "Izzy is Queen of the loophole."

Who needs law school? We are born, it seems, knowing how to take a rule and twist it so it won't stop us from doing what we want to do. This, of course, is not only child's play. It is a national obsession, too. A classic example: the IRS makes rules that CPA's figure out how to interpret and manipulate legally to their clients' advantage. A very current, raw example: Today, whether you are rejoicing or you are weeping over the rulings the Supreme Court made this past week, and the Gun Bill that President Biden just signed into law: we can all agree these changes in the laws of the land have sweeping consequences. Beyond what we can name or know at this point. Also, this week, the 225th General Assembly of our denomination, PC(USA) has been meeting in Louisville, Kentucky and by Zoom, deliberating and voting on new legislation and initiatives, including revisions to our Presbyterian constitution. As we do every two years.

Whether the entity is our nation, our denomination, or a new and struggling church like the ones in Galatia, we must look beneath the laws and ask first, "What is our purpose, our mission, our identity?" From this foundation we form and reform the laws that keep us on the right path. Laws do help us remember and behave in line with who we are and why we are. For us here at FPC, as Christ followers, we first look to Jesus for the answers we need. While Jesus walked this earth, much of his teaching addressed this key issue: the relationship between the freedom to follow according to our faith and the laws that keep us on that path. As well as when laws distract and can even derail us.

If we listen carefully, we notice that Jesus' teachings pointed to a *third way*. He called his followers to live in the space between law and license. This is what Paul is striving to bring home to the local situation in Galatia. Consider how Jesus taught us in his Sermon on the Mount. Again and again our gospels tell us that he said, "You have heard it said, but I say to you." By framing his teaching in this way, he neither affirmed or denied the law. He teaching us to see law as a gift from God intended to promote mutual and reciprocal love, one for another. For the good of the whole community. Especially those on the margins. And as Paul writes in Galatians 6:10, "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all."

Remember that Paul had been a Pharisee named "Saul" for many years. I'm guessing, he had a thing for laws. They had been his touchstones for most of his life so far. Saul, now Paul the Christ follower, gave us one law to follow, as he wrote in 5:14, "*For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The word in the Greek translated here as "summed up" (*pleroo*) more accurately means *fulfilled*. We fulfill our call to Christ by considering all that we do first by this single lens, this single law.

Do we want to be Christ's disciples? We do that by loving our neighbors. Remember the story of the lawyer who in response to Jesus telling him the primacy of this commandment, asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Looking for the loophole perhaps. We can thank this lawyer for his question because Jesus' answer gave us the gem that we now commonly call the parable of "The Good Samaritan." From his parable we learn that "neighbor" in Jesus' book is more than, not less than, we might hope. "Neighbor" in Jesus' definition means all people and especially those who are hurting, those we don't like, don't understand, would rather ignore or dismiss or convert to our way of thinking. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is shorthand for the command to practice daily the self-emptying, mutual, self-sacrificing love of Christ, our Lord. Whenever our spirits and our actions point to a loving relationship with our neighbor, we are following Jesus' third way. We are flying!ⁱ

Of course, with this freedom we so cherish, comes the freedom to muck it up. So many ways for us "earthbound misfits" to stay tethered to sin, what Paul is calling "works of the flesh." That's a hard "no" to sin and evil and its power in the world. All the behaviors that break down society and build up barriers between us. Did you see the long list (which Paul says is "obvious")? It is important for us to note that "works of the Flesh" are *not confined* to sexual misconduct alone. It's a spicy list, in which if we are honest, implicates all of us. Paul is using the term "Flesh" here to stand for the whole realm of the ways humanity breaks covenant with God's law of love.

The question is, given this freedom: which one will we choose? As we heard in Psalm 16:4, "Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows." The "works of the flesh" or the "fruits of the spirit" lie within us. Day to day, person to person, situation to situation, the choice is ours. Christ is calling us to choose Christ, every day, all the time. As psychologist Dr. Rick Hanson has written, "*Each of us have two wolves in the heart, one of love and one of hate. Everything depends on which one we feed each day.*"ⁱⁱ The wolves of hate, jealousy, anger, dissension, can eat away within and between us. Paul writes of this in v. 15 of our text, the consequences of not following the one law.

Remember the nursery rhyme about the two cats of Kilkenny?

*There once were two cats of Kilkenny
each thought there was one cat too many.
So they fought and they fit and they scratched and they bit;
'Til excepting their nails and the tips of their tails,
instead of two cats there weren't any.*

Funny and also terrifying. Wherever there is violence in the world, the “works of the flesh” as Paul put it, are rampant. Internal dissension can destroy one person by suicide, and multiply into a community by a mass shooting; Self-serving hatred between people can turn into genocide or warfare. Self-serving greed threatens to destroy our delicate ecosystem on which we all depend. Today, we see in Galatians this truth: Those who belong to Christ will oppose violence, not by counterviolence, but by manifesting the fruit of the Spirit even in the face of murderous opposition. If we are led by God’s foundational “yes” and not by our fear-driven change-resistant pushbacks of “no,” the fruit of the spirit will bear joy and justice. One decision, one act at a time. As T. Denise Anderson has written, “We are led to liberty by love of neighbor and the Spirit’s guiding.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What are the signs that we are learning to fly? “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” A beautiful list of markers to guide our path. Did you notice what’s missing? What is not a fruit of the spirit? Comfort is not on this list. Comfort is not a fruit of the spirit. Nor is “Control.” Christ gives us the freedom to say “no” to sin, within us and in the world around us. And to say “yes” to loving our neighbor as ourselves from which the fruits of the Spirit will grow. I will leave you with Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Kookaburras,” that speaks poetically to the challenge of the freedom that Christ gives us:

*In every heart there is a coward and a procrastinator.
In every heart there is a god of flowers, just waiting
to come out of its cloud and lift its wings.
The kookaburras, kingfishers, pressed against the edge of
their cage, they asked me to open the door.
Years later I wake in the night and remember how I said to them,
No, and walked away.
They had the brown eyes of soft-hearted dogs.
They didn't want to do anything so extraordinary, only to fly
home to their river.
By now I suppose the great darkness has covered them.
As for myself, I am not yet a god of even the palest flowers.
Nothing else has changed either.
Someone tosses their white bones to the dung-heap.
The sun shines on the latch of their cage.
I lie in the dark, my heart pounding.^{iv}*

Friends, are your hearts pounding? I hear Jesus calling to each of us individually, and to us as a community of faith saying and nodding: “Yes, you too, can learn to fly.”

ⁱThis idea came from Cindy Senarighi & Heidi Green, *Yogadevotion: Practicing in the Presence*, (Credo: Grand Rapids, MI, 2017), Week 25.

ⁱⁱRick Hanson, *Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom*, (New Harbinger: Oakland, CA, 2009), p.133.

ⁱⁱⁱ T. Denise Anderson, “Carrying the Good News,” *Sojourners Magazine*, July 2022, p.49.

^{iv} Mary Oliver, “The Kookaburras,” *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, (Penguin Press: New York, NY, 2017), p. 321.