

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

You probably have noticed, but I don't preach "feel good" sermons. I preach Christ crucified, I preach law, I preach grace through faith. Some of you might leave here feeling a little disquieted now and then. That's okay. Some of you might be troubled by some of the things you hear now and then. That's okay too. Now this morning we have some hard, even difficult verses in our gospel. I may not always talk about verses that are hard or difficult but when I do I'm not interested in trying to smooth out rough edges, because if a pastor does that then he or she very possibly missed the meaning of a passage.

So we come to this morning's gospel and find Jesus saying some pretty harsh things. Someone approaches Jesus and says he will follow wherever Jesus goes, but Jesus' words about having no place to lay his head aren't the enthusiastic welcome one might expect.

To another Jesus says "follow me." The response "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Now it's not clear if the father was dead awaiting burial or if there were family obligations which could only be fulfilled on the father's death which would then give him the freedom to follow. Jesus' response sounds totally harsh, declaring the dead can bury their own dead.

Yet another says he will follow Jesus, but first he wants to say farewell to those at home. But Jesus responds about putting hand to plow and looking back not being fit of the kingdom of God.

Jesus' words sound harsh, they are harsh, but they get our attention. Those who were there to hear these words of Jesus back then, and we who hear these words of Jesus today must understand the nature of life following Jesus. It's not always gentle and sometimes we need to be shaken right out of our comfort zones.

To accept the freedom Jesus offers is to let go of our notions about what we want or think we need, because it's only then that we can experience fully and completely what Jesus offers. We say things like I wish I wasn't so busy, or I'm too tied down to really get involved. But the thing is, Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves, he knows what we need to live the life we were created and called to live.

So we need not be concerned with a place to lay the head, nor do we need worry about obligations to family and friends other than what God places on us. Our focus is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength, to love our neighbors as ourselves. As we give ourselves wholly to God, the Spirit guides us as to how best live out that love with those around us.

Now these verses do not give us a pass on our obligations as spouse, parent or child. No! We are to look to Christ to show us how best fulfill these obligations, rather than assuming we know best, or struggling to figure it all out on our own.

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul describes life empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. There might not appear to be so much of a difference between this and any other well-intentioned way of living but there is a fundamental difference. Most people want what they think is best for themselves, their loved ones, or those around them but what is “best” is open to interpretation as well as open to sin.

As it happens even our best intentions are often tainted by sin, self-interest, or by a lack of understanding. How many times have we endeavored to do so the right thing, for what we think are the right reasons only to have it fall to pieces?

But look at our reading from Galatians, note how Paul tells us Christ has set us free, not for self-indulgence but to better serve God and our neighbor. The Apostle draws a contrast between the desires of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. To put it bluntly, the desires of the flesh are us doing what we want because we want to do them. That’s the common thread that connects fornication, sorcery, drunkenness, quarrels and dissension and the rest. Now Paul doesn’t say this is an exhaustive list, he adds “and things like these” that is, things driven by self-centered and self-serving desires, driven to do what we want because we want to.

In contrast however, the source of the fruits of the Spirit is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. And we can tell they are of the Spirit because these fruits fulfill the two commandments, to love God and love neighbor. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its desires and passions. What we want, not just those things we might think of as self-centered and sinful but also those we might consider noble or well-intentioned has been put to death, so that we can be brought to life in Christ and made open to the Spirit working in and through us.

The desires and passions of the flesh don’t die easily. They rise up every time we hear the commands of Christ and respond with okay but, and insert what we think should happen. The flesh threatens in each instance we resist the Spirit’s leading in favor of something we prefer, that adds to our satisfaction. The flesh waits to impose its slavery of self-gratification when we resist the freedom of Jesus to love God and our neighbor. It waits to tempt us to question and doubt God’s promises, to put our faith in our desires and plans, rather than trusting in the goodness and mercy of Jesus in the life to which he has called us regardless of the struggles it may involve.

Life in the Spirit frees us from servitude to sin. Life in Christ saves us from the tyranny of our desires and rescues us from struggling to fulfill them. The freedom of Christ, tells us to give up our desires which end in death, in exchange for eternal life that begins now and continues in the world to come.

Our readings today are not easy to hear, nor comfortable to have God put into practice in our lives. But Jesus never offered, let alone promised anything easy or comfortable, instead he offers and promises love and salvation. AMEN