

A Meditation for June 26/22, 'Proper 8 in Year C' – pg. 1

By the Rev. Warren Ball of Mt. Albert United Church

Hello and welcome to my meditation for this week! Today, we're 'turning' once again to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he is going to tell us that we can receive (even now!) the gifts of God's spirit. What an opportunity is at hand so, come, let us look to claim that birthright, and let us begin to do so as we turn to God in prayer:

**God of all, teach us about your life now – a life in the Spirit!
Unburden us from our fears, and guide us towards your joy,
instil in us your freedom that we may live out your love for all. Amen.**

⇒ Hymn suggestion: MV1 'All Are Welcome'

Today's Scripture reading: *from Galatians 5:1;13-25 'Christian freedom'*

For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery ... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Sermon: 'Belonging or Be Longing?'

Be in our thoughts now, O God, and help us to better understand your will. Then, understanding better, help us to live your will more fully. This we ask in Jesus' name, amen.

This morning, across the span of about one thousand, nine hundred and seventy years, the Apostle Paul says that we can experience some of the fruits of God's very own spirit. We can experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness,

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self-control, inspiration. In fact, Paul says that we can develop such a longing for those things that we can begin to “be-long” to them – that those things will take us, then remake us in their very own image. Well, what do you think? Is that just the stuff that the preacher talks about on Sunday mornings? Or, can it make a real difference in the way that you and I are going to experience life this week? I’m mindful here of something that the British writer, Gilbert Chesterton, once said back in the early 1900’s – he said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left, by and large, untried!”

Well, let me start to unwrap that dilemma with a little illustration. I’ll never forget the first time that I went downhill skiing. It almost proved to be almost a complete and total disaster! You see, as I started down the hill, it felt like I was going to pick up speed, that I’d have no way to stop. So, what I did was lean uphill, and lost even more control! As it turned out, I wasn’t skiing down that hill, I was falling down it! But there’s a trick to downhill skiing, isn’t there? The control comes from the outer, downhill ski – that’s the ski that enables us to turn, that’s the ski that enables us to slow down and stop. But, oh my word, isn’t it counterintuitive, doesn’t it go against all common sense, to lean down the hill, to lean into more activity, before we can even start to control what’s going on?

Human spirituality is just like that, is it not? After all, there’s much about spirituality that’s counterintuitive, there’s much about it that simply goes against the grain of our instincts! Just think about these statements from Jesus: the first shall be last and the last shall be first; if you want to find yourself, first give yourself away; if you would know real wealth, spend the wealth that you have on others. Those statements are what a life in the spirit is all about and, as counterintuitive as it may be! Leaning on the wisdom of the teaching that Jesus has left to us. Leaning downhill into the unknown, not leaning uphill into what we’ve always done. Stepping out on faith, even when it feels as though we’re losing control. Trusting to all the gifts, abilities, and energies that are already within us, even though we have never known them to be there. That, says Paul, is how we come to feel that we’re standing on holy ground. That, says Paul, is how we can so belong to God that we become God’s longing for relationship in the world.

And that’s also exactly what happened to a woman named Shelby, despite how it may appear. Or, perhaps, because of how it appears! This woman, Shelby, became a teenage mother when her boyfriend’s insistence wore down her sense of what was right. Then, Shelby had a whole series of disastrous relationships as she kept ‘looking for love in all the wrong places’ until, by the time Shelby was 30, she had four children from three different men, a totally battered sense of self-esteem, and very little hope for the kind of life that she had always wanted.

Then Shelby met a man named David, who’d had a similar experience of life from the other side of the gender divide. David had been married twice and had fathered three children but, when he met Shelby, he was living all alone with an overwhelming sense of failure. Now then, David was sixteen years older than Shelby, and many who knew them felt that

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their relationship was hopelessly unbalanced. But Shelby and David found a mutual understanding in each other, and a genuine harmony, that they'd never known before. And they also came to find the special 'life in the spirit' about which Paul spoke, not that it came about in any sort of glowing, happily-ever-after sort of way!

It all started when David received a phone call from a son whom he'd hardly known – Thomas, a twenty-two-year-old young man, from whom David had been estranged for more than twenty years. You see, David's first partner had walked out on him when Thomas was yet an infant, and David hadn't heard from Thomas for all those long years, until this phone request: "Dad, I've been living in Indonesia where I picked up malaria. I'm back home now, but I'm very sick. I haven't got any health coverage, and I can't afford to go to the hospital. Can you help me?" [This story took place in the United States where, of course, they don't have universal health care!] David was at a complete loss, until Shelby offered to take Thomas in and nurse him in a way that they could financially afford. Now it sure wasn't easy for Shelby, because she'd never had any real nursing experience. In fact, it often felt to her as though she was out of control as the situation seemed to spiral downhill – just as I once skied out of control down a snowy mountain. But Thomas himself quickly improved under Shelby's care, and some quinine, a relatively inexpensive medication. Meanwhile, David was so relieved that Thomas was improving, and that he had his son back, that he started to play a bigger and bigger role in what was happening. And, so, when Thomas finally recovered, all three of them (the father, the son, and the holy stepmother!) all began to glimpse a whole new side to life.

What they had was an experience of God's love, a love that never lets us go. It's built from the fruits of God's Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, hope, and self-control. We, too, can live with the joys of those same spiritual qualities! They come as we act on faith and live out of God's love. They come as we long for wholeness such that we become God's longing. We become God's longing through prayer, and by developing a richer, deeper relationship with the Bible. We become God's longing by understanding more and yet more of our spiritual tradition. We become God's longing (each of us as we're able!) by placing our egos on hold and serving God's love. Amen? Oh, yes: amen!

Come, let us turn back to God now in prayer; come, let us pray:

Gracious God, we thank you with all of our hearts, and our minds, and our spirits, for loaning us the gifts of your spirit, to make us holy, to lead us into truth, to help us live with your aptitudes such that we get the most out of, and contribute the most to, the miraculous ebb and flow of life!

You have begun a good work in us, O God, yet, we confess, that our ego-centred pessimism often overwhelms all sense of spiritual hope. So, confront us now with our hidden prejudices, our fears, and our selfish blind-spots that deny and betray our efforts to include

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your values more fully in our lives. Then enable us to see the real causes of strife, remove from us all of our false senses of superiority, teach us to grow in unity with all your children as we endeavour to live in the light of your love. Bless us, God, that we may become a blessing to others, and the work of your love throughout creation.

We pray now for all who are facing difficulty this day and we pray, too, for all the places where there's difficulty. And, in the silence of the next moments, O God, receive the deep burdens that our spirits bear today: *moment of silence*.

All that I have named with my words, all that lies yet too deep for words to touch, we bring to you, God, as we take those words that Jesus once taught us and pray together the following version of Christ's Prayer:

Holy God, who is heaven:

**hallowed be your name, followed be your way
and done be your will throughout creation.**

**Feed us with the bread that we need for today
and forgive us for the hurts that we cause others,
even as we learn to forgive those who hurt us.**

Strengthen us in times of temptation

and free us from the grip of all that is evil,

for you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever, amen.

⇒ Hymn suggestion: VU421 'Lead On, O Cloud of Presence'

Made as new with, and for, your love, anoint us with the gifts of your spirit, O Loving God, that we may belong to you, even as we become longing for your 'kin-dom' – amen!