

Bill Countryman

Good Shepherd Berkeley

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, June 27, 2010

Proper 8C: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Ps. 77:1-2, 11-20; Gal. 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

FROM WORKS OF THE FLESH TO FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: CHANGING OUR FOCUS

Our readings this morning are full of juicy stories. And I do like the stories in scripture. There's always a lot to chew on and think about. So you may be surprised today when I turn instead to our reading from Galatians. It seems, in comparison, like unpromising stuff: Paul carrying on about the "works of the flesh." What do you suppose he's talking about?

Well, there's sex, of course, and drugs . . . and sex . . . and rock'n'roll . . . and, well, sex . . . and maybe gluttony. In our modern English language, "works of the flesh" seem clearly defined. They're either things you ingest or things you smoke or things you inject or things you get naked for. And preachers have been preaching against them for thousands of years—to limited effect.

Of late, there's been a certain tendency to suggest that they are not, in fact, the worst of sins. After all, they hardly hold a candle to racism, oppression of the poor, terrorism and genocide. Our first, modern reaction may be to tell Paul, "Get a bit more serious, would you?"

Sure enough, when Paul begins listing "the works of the flesh," he starts off pretty much the way we might expect: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness." But then he seems to veer off in another direction: ". . . enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy. . ."

I'll bet you're not used to thinking of partisan politics as one of the sins of the flesh, or arguments between neighbors or co-workers or family members, or resentments about other people. No, I don't usually think of them in those terms either.

But Paul does. And this is important because it tells us that he really means something different when he talks about "the flesh," something not quite the same as what we usually mean by it. I'll tell you what I think he means: he means all the things in us that are weak and frightened—all the things that make us defensive, not just in an everyday, practical way (the way you have to be a little bit defensive to live in a big city), but in an aggressively hostile way.

The flesh is that element in us that realizes we're vulnerable and decides that it's a war out there and you'd better look out for number one. So the works of the flesh are things like greed, theft, imperialism, and oppression of others. They also include the things we thought of first: sex, drugs, and so forth—because they include *all* the ways that we grab at the world around us, trying to get whatever we can for fear that somebody else will get there first, trying

to make ourselves happy by stuffing in pleasurable experiences, trying to give ourselves at least the feeling of being invulnerable.

But Paul tells us that the root problem isn't *desire*. It's not just that we *want* things and *want* pleasures. The root problem is *fear*. We see ourselves as little, defenseless bundles of flesh and bone that are going to die one day. And just thinking about it scares us half way there by itself. And from the fear it's a short hop to the bumper sticker that was popular a few decades ago: The one who dies with the most toys wins.

Paul didn't feel that a life of chewing on each other would lead to human happiness—even if you did wind up with the most toys. He wasn't being vindictive when he wrote, "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." It's just a factual statement. They wouldn't know how to live there, how to contribute to it, how to benefit by it, how to delight in it. The kingdom of God is a way of living; it's not a visit to the shopping mall with an unlimited budget.

The kingdom of God is a way of living together. Paul says it's based on a different vision of human life that he calls "the Spirit." That would be the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that we come to know in the story of Jesus.

Jesus didn't live like a defensive little bundle of flesh and bones destined to die one day. He was, in fact, as vulnerable as any of the rest of us. But he chose to live as someone who could afford to give, even though he was poor, as someone who didn't have to defend himself tooth and nail, even though he knew early on that he would get killed for it. He lived as if the really important thing about human life—and the secret to human happiness and joy—isn't our weakness; it's our ability to be generous.

When we catch that Spirit—or, better, when the Spirit catches us—we find ourselves doing something quite different from "the works of the flesh." Paul doesn't even use the phrase "*works of the Spirit*" to describe it. It's not *work*, in the sense of something we grit our teeth and grind out day by day. It's "the fruit of the Spirit," something that grows inside us when we give it the chance.

". . . the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." That's a recipe for a very different kind of community life. In fact, it's the recipe for the life of the kingdom of heaven, where we welcome each other into the world God has always imagined for us and keeps trying to build with us.

It's a beautiful picture Paul draws for the Galatians—a church, by the way, that was being torn apart by conflict when he wrote to them. What did he want them to do about it? Well, he wanted them to remember that this is where their true identity lay. "If we live by the

Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit," he wrote. He wanted them to give up their self-protective behaviors: conceit, arrogance, competitiveness, envy. He thought they had the power, through the Spirit, to do that. And he was sure it would transform their life together.

And what do Paul's words have to say to us in this East Bay congregation of people God has drawn from hither and yon to be an outpost of the kingdom of God? We're not riven by quarrels like the church in ancient Galatia. We're probably not as much a face-to-face community as they were; much of our lives we lead outside the context of the church. We don't interact at the same level of intensity they did.

But what Paul wrote to the Galatians still holds. We already know that "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity," and the rest make for a better kind of human life than "strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels," and all that lot. The problem, of course, is getting from the one to the other. It's easy to get stuck in the posture of self-defense in a world that seems determined to take advantage of us. The challenge is to start making the transition to the freedom of generosity.

What Paul is telling the Galatians, I think, is to keep raising their eyes. Look toward the kind of life you could have. That's harder to do than it sounds. It's easier to go back over the dangers and failures of the past. How much of our lives do we spend re-fighting old battles?

In fact, there's an old tradition in Christian spirituality of the examination of conscience—taking a moment every evening or week (or, at least, yearly during Lent) to think back and identify the sins you've committed. And there's a good side to that. It can help us develop some honesty about ourselves. It certainly helps keep you humble. But it doesn't do much to help you grow beyond the "works of the flesh."

A spiritual practice that focuses mainly on "the works of the flesh" ties us to the past, puts us in the posture of reaction, of defense. It's about what went wrong—past tense. It's not about growth, change, renewal.

Let's try, individually and together, a new spin on this old tradition instead and make an examination based not on the sins we've committed, but on the kind of people we hope yet to become. In fact, Paul would say that the Spirit is already moving us in that direction. Stay focused on the ways God's grace offers us to become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous in your life and in our life together.

No doubt we'll become aware, in the process, of failures, too. But we'll be concentrating on what it's like to grow into the future as people who embody more and more of these generous, admirable virtues.

What sort of church will this make us? We won't look entirely different. There's a lot of this going on among us already. But the more we cultivate the spirit of generosity, the more we share with others the fruit of the Spirit, the more we will be transformed and the more we will be agents of transformation.

We won't become perfect at it in this life. But we'll get better at it as we go. And every sharing of kindness and generosity—every step forward in our freedom to share—will be a further foretaste of what real human life is all about. The kingdom is not just out there. It starts here. How we live together makes a difference we will never be able adequately to evaluate or understand. But we'll know it's happening!

". . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. . . ." Let's look in that direction for our lives here. May the whole place be awash in them!