

A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 17, 2006

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“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. (from the epistle, Galatians 5:16f.).

To “walk in the Spirit” does not mean to try to act spiritual or otherworldly, nor does it mean to live a non-physical existence. In the Bible the word “walk” refers to the way we go about life. To go about life “in the Spirit” means to live life under the influence of the Holy Spirit—the gift God gave us in baptism.

As a governing influence in our lives, the Holy Spirit stands in contrast with what St. Paul calls “the lust of the flesh.” The word “lust” in this passage does not refer primarily to sexual desire. It refers to all of the desires of fallen human nature. When we live a life governed by the lust of the flesh, we do whatever we feel like doing without considering whether what we feel like doing is right or good. And we suffer the consequences.

The Holy Spirit puts within us the desire to do the will of God. Consequently, there is, in the spiritual life, a war between our natural desires and the desires of the Holy Spirit. The goal of the life of prayer is to grow stronger in the Holy Spirit so that we learn to do what the Spirit leads us to do and so experience what St. Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit” in our lives.

For example, if you always eat just what you feel like eating you will not have a very healthy diet and your body will suffer as a consequence. The wise person disciplines himself to eat healthy food—food that may not be as immediately attractive—because he knows it is better for him. And he benefits from it over time.

The spiritual life is like this. If we always do whatever we feel like doing we will do all sorts of spiritually unhealthy things and our relationship with Christ will suffer as a consequence. The Holy Spirit leads us to do the things that are right and good and spiritually healthy—even when they are the things that we do not feel like doing.

We should repeat this for emphasis. There are things that we feel like doing that we ought not to do because they are not God’s will and are not good for us. And there are things we don’t feel like doing that we ought to do because they are good for us. The purpose of the spiritual life is to train us to do what is good even when—or especially when—we do not feel like it. Choosing the good in opposition to our natural impulses to the contrary is what it means to “walk in the Spirit.”

Now, to “walk in the Spirit” is not simply a matter of making a series of behavioral decisions from moment to moment. It is a matter of practicing certain spiritual disciplines that lead us to do what is right. What St. Paul calls the “lust of the flesh” is the default setting within us. It is what we do without any other influence. Spiritual disciplines help to change that default setting so that our natural impulse comes to be doing what is right.

Spiritual disciplines are patterns of behavior that we impose upon our life style in order to foster spiritual growth. For example, we come to church on Sunday. Why do we come? We could sleep in more. We could watch more football. We could go to an earlier brunch. Why do we come? If we

understand correctly, we come because we know it is right and good to honor God on the Lord's Day. We come because there is a spiritual benefit to worship and receiving the sacrament.

Over time we see the benefit of the grace we receive because of our habitual presence at the altar of God. That grace overshadows what we would rather have done at the time.

Why would we set aside time for prayer and the reading of Scripture each day, for the praying of the daily office? We don't always feel like it. Sometimes some other urgency of life is more attractive at the moment. But when we commit ourselves to daily prayer and Bible reading for five or ten years, we look back and see the benefit of the discipline. And we realize that what we might have done instead would not have produced the same fruit.

Why would we fast? Why would we forgo some pleasure or entertainment or food? Because self-control is one of the fruits of the spirit cultivated by fasting. Why would we withdraw into silence when our world is so full of compelling things to watch and hear? Because peace and patience are fruits of the spirit that are cultivated by the practice of silence and solitude. Why would we tithe? Why would we be generous to others with our time and resources? Because contentment and thankfulness are fruits of the spirit that are cultivated by giving.

In the practice of spiritual disciplines we can see the pattern of the Cross. Dying on the cross was not what Jesus wanted to do; but the cross produced the fruit of resurrection. Just so, we crucify the flesh through the practice of spiritual discipline—disciplines we may not want to do or feel like doing. These disciplines produce in us the fruit of new resurrection life.

Without discipline, without some intentional living out of the life of faith, we are left to follow the desires of our fallen nature. Thus, the exhortation to walk in the Spirit is an exhortation to impose upon our lives patterns of spiritual exercise that fill our lives with grace and enable us to do the will of God.

As St. Paul says, "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."