

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (C)

27 June 2010

“Fruit of the Spirit”

I. It was lunchtime at Cornerstone Engineering. Martin Luther Jones and his fellow co-op students were sitting around a table in the corner of the cafeteria, along with a couple younger employees of the firm who were recent graduates of their university. Of the eight of them, only three of them were Christians: Marty, Sam and Chloe. Marty and Sam both happened to be Lutherans. Chloe from an evangelical background. Each was active in their congregations.

It wasn't always easy being a Christian in the sciences. Scientists were always looking for concrete proof for their theories. For something to be considered “true” you had to be able to observe it, track it, and measure it. Things of the “spirit” were always treated with suspicion.

Marty knew that their fellow students and coworkers kept an eye on these Christians. Not that they kept secret journals of what they said or did. But it was clear that they were observing whether their actions were consistent with what they professed. Hypocrisy—saying one thing, while doing another—was always one of the first criticisms non-Christians leveled at the Church.

Which was why Marty was feeling increasingly uncomfortable with Sam. To put the best construction on it, Sam tended to be what some might call “confident”. And he had a lot to be “confident” about. He was good-looking and athletic, smart and creative. He was a friendly guy, fun to be around, and a natural leader. People wanted to be around him, including Marty and Chloe. But Sam also had a bad habit of using that to his advantage and to the disadvantage of others. When they were together he would be buddy-buddy with everyone. But when he was alone with one or two, he would often talk about others disparagingly and sometimes even with open disdain.

Just last week, during a coffee break, Sam remarked to Marty and their supervisor about how he thought Chloe was a bit of an airhead. He said that he didn't think she would get very far in their profession. “She's just so blonde!” he said with a laugh.

What unnerved Marty was that he had joined in the laughter, too. Yes, Chloe could sometimes be a little dense—like everyone, including himself, could be at times—but she was still a very competent engineer. And, even if she wasn't quite as talented as Sam, she certainly shouldn't be treated like that, especially behind her back and in front of others.

II. That was weighing on Marty's heart this noon-time as he thought about Pastor Sadler's sermon he had heard the day before. It was based on Galatians 5, on the topic of the fruit of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control". Each of those had to do with relationships with others, especially with fellow believers. How we treat them gives evidence of a faith that is healthy or unhealthy, a life that is in step with the Holy Spirit or tripped up by the sinful nature. Backbiting, "jealousy . . . rivalries, dissensions" were among those "works of the flesh".

It had struck Marty as important when the pastor pointed out that the word "fruit" was a singular form rather than plural: "fruit" as opposed to "fruits". Unlike spiritual gifts like teaching, service and leadership, it isn't that Christians have one or more unique gifts given by the Holy Spirit to be used in the Body of Christ. It's not that one has "patience" and another "kindness". The "fruit" are given by the Spirit as a whole. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, loyalty, gentleness and self control" are part and parcel of the Christian life rooted in Jesus and brought forth by the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life. This fruit naturally, or better super-naturally, springs from a faith relationship with Christ. He is the Vine, we are the branches. And as Jesus says in John 15: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).

Pastor Sadler had also reminded them that the "fruit of the Spirit" ought to be cultivated by Christians. When "the works of the flesh" spring up like weeds and threaten to obscure or choke out the fruit of the Spirit, the Christian should repent and strive to do better. Like St. Paul said, salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus shouldn't become an excuse for being content to treat others poorly. To continue to live according to the flesh without repentance is to mock God's grace and to risk losing the kingdom of God.

III. That's why Marty resolved to talk with Sam after work. He knew it wouldn't be easy. Sam might take offense. He might turn it around against Marty, telling the others that Martin Luther Jones was an arrogant "holier-than-thou" hypocrite. Marty knew he needed to do what the Lord expected of him. It was time to keep his hand on the plow, to speak in love, but also speak the truth in love. It wasn't up to him to determine how Sam would receive the truth. That he would have to entrust to the Holy Spirit.

As Marty stood up with his lunch tray, he didn't notice that the person behind him was getting out of his chair at the very same time. As their chairs collided Marty's tray tipped back and his half-full glass of iced tea and a plate with remnants of mashed potatoes and gravy fell back against what had been a clean blue shirt. Of course, Sam was quick to call out, "Way to go, Mr. Manual Dexterity!"

This time, the Holy Spirit's work through God's Word caught Marty's tongue before he could respond in kind. Instead of displaying "enmity and strife" by coming back, "And thank *you*, Mr. Kindness, Goodness and Gentleness!" Marty just smiled a lopsided grin and said, "Yeah, that's why I didn't make Canada's World Cup team."

It wasn't until he and Sam happened to be standing alone at the sink in the men's washroom that Marty said, "You know, Sam, that wasn't a very good witness back there at the lunch table." Immediately Sam rounded on him, "And since when did God appoint you the judge of the living and the dead?"

Again, by God's grace, Marty was enabled to respond rather than simply react. "Hey, Sam," Marty replied with a smile, his hands raised in a gesture of peace, "I'm not trying to attack you."

"I just wanted to let you know, just between you and me, that what you said was hurtful. But what was even more hurtful was that it really didn't give a very good example of how Christians treat others." As he said this, Sam, who had been angrily drying his hands with paper towel began to cool down and listen. Knowing that Sam had also been in church on Sunday, Marty continued, "Please, don't get me wrong". "I'm not always very good at showing the fruit of the Spirit. I mean, when you made fun of me back there, my flesh wanted me to come back with something that would embarrass you. Just this morning, I jumped on my mom for not having done something for me that she said she would do for me. Thank God she forgave me and gave me a hug before I headed out the door for work".

By this time Sam's head was hanging a bit and his shoulders were sagging. "Yeah, my mouth get's me in trouble, too," he confessed. "Ya know, I really want to be a better Christian. I'm just not always sure how to do that. I'm sorry for mocking you out back there".

This, of course, was Marty's opportunity to share the Good News with his brother. "I forgive you, Sam" he said, placing his hand on his shoulder. "If it weren't for Jesus, we wouldn't stand a chance. But He died for our big mouths and over-inflated egos. He did that, not because we're so fun to be around, but because He loves us. You know that as well as I, right?"

As they turned to leave the washroom, Sam patted Marty on the back. "Thanks, buddy. Thanks for having the guts to confront me face to face. And thanks for doing it in such a classy way."

After work that evening, Marty and Sam went and had a beer together at Joe's Pub. They talked for a while about how "crucifying the flesh" on a daily basis was such a challenging thing to do. It turned out that a lot of Sam's apparent self-confidence was really some overcompensation for a rather badly bruised sense of self. His dad was a pretty driven guy whose own father had had very high expectations of him and never failed to point it out when he didn't reach his standards. They talked about how their heavenly Father also had high standards, a standard of perfect holiness. They thanked the Lord that He sent Jesus to the cross to pay the price of their failures, to cover over their sins with His precious blood. They made a pact with each other to pray for each other and to hold one another accountable before the Lord so that they might be better witnesses for Jesus at work.

That Sunday, as Marty knelt with his family at the communion rail, Marty thanked the Lord for demonstrating to him the fruit of the Spirit, for treating him with such love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and gentleness. As he received the body and blood of Christ, he knew that he was not alone. The Lord was with him as He was also with Sam. Together, freed from the necessity to prove themselves to God and others, they could work with the Spirit to evidence His fruit so that others might see and ask what it was—who it was—that led them to treat them with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

*Preached at Historic St. Paul's Lutheran Church-Kitchener, ON
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