

Galatians

5 ¹For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;^[c] only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,^[d] but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

The Works of the Flesh

¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy,^[e] 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.

The Fruit of the Spirit

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Luke 9: 51-62

A Samaritan Village Refuses to Receive Jesus

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"^[k] ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then^[i] they went on to another village.

Would-Be Followers of Jesus

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶⁰But Jesus^[m] said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."⁶¹ Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶²Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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Luke 9: 51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-26

What's Your Excuse?

Kerra Becker English

This is the middle of a three week series of sermons that will outline my guiding principles when it comes to evangelism. Whenever I talk about the good news of God's love, and the desire to spread that good news in the world, I hope to follow all three principles. The first one that I shared last week was: In Scripture, all means all. The good news is that God's love is for ALL people, no exceptions. The second principle is: But that doesn't mean - Anything Goes. When Jesus calls us to follow him – he is asking us to pay attention to his teaching and learn from his example. And then the third week will be about going out into the world with this news – and the reminder for that week will be that always, always, the outcomes belong to God alone.

SO...

1) All means all

2) But that doesn't mean "Anything Goes"

And, 3) The Outcomes are God's

Jesus tends to tell stories more than he issues commands. However, two of his most famous commands can be linked with particular circumstances. The first is where he succinctly summarizes all of Jewish law and identifies that command as the complete fulfillment of God's expectations not only for this life but also in order to receive a guaranteed spot in the next. As such, his most well known command was the scriptural basis for last week's sermon, and it goes something like this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. He also riffs on that command in a lot of other teaching moments: Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. There is no better gift than this,

to lay down your life for your friends. There are a lot of ways that Jesus tells us directly to love or to show loving-kindness toward other people.

The second kind of command Jesus tends to issue more directly, often to a particular person who is intrigued by who he is and wants to go deeper. To those individuals, Jesus says, "Follow me." Now, I would reiterate that the most basic spiritual move for absolutely every person, Jew, Greek, Samaritan, regular church attendee, spiritual but not religious type, even humanistic atheist, really *whoever* intuitively feels that there is something out there greater than me and my own little bubble is this: just LOVE. Start there, and make love a priority. Jesus taught that FIRST and foremost. Also, I happen to believe that any religion worth its salt and with its basis in truth will have as its central tenet an understanding that love is, in some way or fashion, the ultimate purpose of humankind. BUT, if you intend to take the peculiarly Christian leap of faith, then at some point you, meaning YOU directly, will be asked to follow Jesus. And since we are considering what it means to be evangelists, it may be wise for us to think about what it means to follow Jesus ourselves before we invite others to follow Jesus with us. So, why is it important to follow Jesus? What difference does it make? What if I'm already a loving, kind person, and already have a relationship with my higher power? Is there more to it than that?

Well, looking further at these and a few other scriptural examples, I would say that accepting the invitation to follow Jesus, to work at living as he lived and loving as he loved, gives life purpose and meaning. It directs us and guides us toward a particular kind of life that is not only loving, but sacrificially so. It allows us to experience courage, grace, and a bunch of those things that Paul likes to list as spiritual gifts, things like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There's a reason that early

Christians simply called themselves, The Way. And yet, even scripture reminds us that some people choose not to go in the same way as Jesus, and that tends to be where those stories end.

Now many of today's evangelists are all about getting people to believe in Jesus, to ascribe to doctrinal truths about who he was and why ascent to his story is crucial to salvation. Jesus himself seemed more interested in creating disciples, people who would follow along his path – and yet his evangelism technique was never phrased as a demand or ultimatum. The person standing before him seemed to always have a real choice. Jesus never made a “do it or else” kind of request of anyone. But when he asked a person to follow, it was quite serious. It often meant dying to one way to choose another. The person would have to have love at the center of absolutely everything even knowing that there would be times that the choice to love would be terribly difficult. And so it goes that the real moral choice that we make when we decide to follow Jesus is not simply about adopting certain political stances or theological understandings, following Jesus requires a change of heart, a desire to live life to a particular end in all that we do and then the morality Jesus teaches is bound to follow.

Paul being Paul, he reminds us that the gifts of the Spirit and the desires of the flesh are constantly vying for the attention of believers and non-believers alike. Some days our moral compass will point us directly to where Jesus is heading, and other days, maybe not so much. And just because we didn't choose to follow Jesus' way today, that doesn't leave us condemned, it leaves us forgiven for another day to recommit ourselves to the spiritual demands of love. The Samaritan village that the disciples want to smite for their apathy, Jesus tells them to leave it alone. The would-be follower of Jesus who wants to go and bury his father first is pressed about his excuses – but given the freedom – follow, or don't follow. But this is what it is. The Way of Jesus requires something of us. It requires us to give ourselves fully. It requires cultivation of the

gifts of the Spirit. It demands that we are committed to love in such a way that it might make others uncomfortable. For the rich young ruler, it meant giving up wealth. For the Gerasene demoniac, it meant obeying when Jesus told him to go back home after he was healed rather than travel on with Jesus and his companions. For James and John, it meant leaving their livelihood for a life on the road rather than on the sea. The way Jesus calls us to follow can look different for each of us. And for some, it may mean turning and walking away a few times before being truly ready to follow.

So the real question for those of us gathered here today who have been called to follow, or perhaps who are being given that nudge again today, is “What’s your excuse?” What’s keeping you from following Jesus right now, in this moment? Perhaps there are a couple of you who are clearly on the path – no wavering – no tiredness or busyness will keep you from the spiritual tasks ahead. That’s awesome! Sometimes I look at this window, this depiction of Jesus right above my head when I come into this sanctuary and feel as though Jesus has beckoned me to be right here, exactly where I find myself this morning. But there are other days, more other days really, where I have questions, lots and lots of questions. What’s the purpose of life, and more particularly, what’s my purpose in life? Why did I just spend an hour reading stupid stuff on Facebook? Is that really how I was to spend my time today? Is that what I got out of bed for this morning? Then I look at my family, and how often I take them for granted, when instead I know that Jesus called them into my life for me to love. I look at all the pain in the world and wonder where Jesus would want me to start and it keeps me frozen from doing anything. I might have really good and important stuff I think I’m supposed to be doing, then I get interrupted in my office by someone who needs hotel help for the night – and I find myself getting more and more irritated the longer that it takes to help. My excuses – like demons – are Legion.

The excuses of the institutional church pile up as well. We don't have enough money. We've never done it that way before. That project can't be done decently or in order. They aren't our kind of Christians. Our policy says no. Our theology won't allow us to agree. It's just too darn messy. The Christian church often doesn't look like it's following where Jesus is going. He's left us in the dust!

I get weary of all the excuses. Jesus seemed to be pretty exasperated in this story from Luke too. The guy wanting to follow actually has a pretty good reason to wait. He wants to go to his own father's funeral, put the family's life back in order, and Jesus says, "No." This isn't even a case of good versus evil, or love versus hate. The timing isn't right – but Jesus has a word, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God." Did he, did he not? The story doesn't say in any of these cases. Are the followers of Jesus really up to the challenge?

I wonder. Sometimes we get with the program, and other times, we probably hang back a little too long. Recently, we've had two more young couples ask to use our church for their weddings who aren't members here, whose connections are to church affiliations way different from ours. Do we put up intentional roadblocks because they are not "like us" or do we encourage them and be supportive in this time of life transition? What about the faith based organizations that are trying to tackle the challenges around the hotel situation along I-95? We have a strange mix of folks living long-term in hotels for shelter. Some are poor families, some are down on their luck individuals, and others are there for nefarious purposes. It truly takes tough love and the willingness to jump into a very messy situation to find solutions. For some, it's about following Jesus' heart for the poor, for others it's about saving souls. It probably

doesn't matter why though, does it? Actually seeing the problem and being unable to ignore it – that is probably what Jesus would do.

Oftentimes, if you don't have a premise for evangelism that's about saving souls for Jesus, it gets interpreted that you aren't serious about evangelism, that your church may not want to grow, or that you're offering too many excuses like in these stories. I say that church membership is way too low of a bar when it comes to being Jesus' followers. Just because we give people a choice as to how and when they are really ready to follow doesn't mean that growing in Christian discipleship isn't an important thing for the church to be doing, maybe it's really THE thing that the church should be doing, which makes membership not an end goal, but merely an entry point into the conversation. Evangelism isn't about racking up numbers for our church, but freeing people for relationship with God. However, I have found that following Jesus, really wanting to be in love with the world as he was is super-duper hard and that not everyone will be ready to pick up their own cross and get moving right now, today. And just because we don't push a political platform or a particular theological interpretation doesn't mean that we believe that you can do whatever you want and still be a true follower of Christ. If you don't have love in your heart, the most noble looking cause from the outside can be completely twisted within. And the most messy un-put-together person may be exactly on the right track. It's not "anything goes," it's "everything matters" when the choice is presented to you, "Do you want to follow Jesus?" It's different from the belief question to be sure.

In thinking about this idea around evangelism this week and also being at Richmond Hill for this cohorts graduation as spiritual directors, I came across a poem that has been attributed to Jesuit priest, Father Pedro Arrupe. If I didn't have so much I wanted to explain this morning, I probably could have read this poem and said – yes –this is what following Jesus is about. I hope

to spend some time with this poem in the weeks or months ahead, and I will leave some copies here in case you want to take it home as well. We are called, by Jesus to follow, and as such we are called to fall in love as he did, with God's whole world.

Fall in Love

Attributed to **Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ** (1907-1991)

Nothing is more practical than
finding God, than
falling in Love
in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in Love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.