

Scripture: Galatians 5:1,13-25

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

The Nature of Christian Freedom

¹³ For 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. ¹⁴ For 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

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

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Proclamation of the Word

Do you pay attention to the wind? I know I do not, unless it is high and dangerous, and I happen to be driving. I get up in the morning and I check the weather app on my phone. I am looking for two things: the temperature and whether it will rain. That is about it. I am content to know that so I can dress for the weather. But wind- I never check the wind speed or direction. Do you? Sailors always check the wind. They depend on it. They need to be experts in the wind. They know without it they cannot get anywhere. They are dead in the water.

You and I can feel dead in the water some times, spiritually stuck or numb. But God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit because Jesus offers life and life abundant. The Holy Spirit is *Ruach in Hebrew* which means Wind. Like the wind, the Holy Spirit can be peaceful and gentle or powerful and dangerous. Like sailing, God desires for us to be filled with the Spirit, moving in freedom as we are guided by God. God calls us to partner with the Spirit much like a sailor must partner with the wind to move in the right direction.

I have been reading Joan Gray's book, *Sailboat Church*, and our series is based on some of these ideas.ⁱ As we experience the peace and the power of the Holy Spirit today, we must learn to sail. Part of the freedom of sailing is learning to catch the winds. According to Gray the core purpose of the church is to partner with the Holy Trinity in the salvation and transformation of the world. So Christian Sailors

are those who intentionally commit to this mission and put themselves under the authority of the Lord and head of the church, Jesus Christ. Sailors know that apart from Jesus we can do nothing, but with God nothing is impossible. So trusting Jesus is essential to harness the winds of the Spirit.

Sailors must trust. To desire that relationship is our first practice in learning to sail. The first prayer of trust in the Bible went like this, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." I remember my niece telling me she had accepted Jesus in her heart at about age 5. I was happy for her. Her mother was a good southern Baptist, and I understood that she was "praying the Jesus prayer." Speaking of Baptists, we are going to share worship in a couple of weeks with First Baptist. On June 26 we will go there and I will preach. On July 3 they will come here and Rusty Brock will preach. Back to the Jesus prayer. It is not just a Baptist thing. At some point all who want to believe must pray a prayer that expresses that desire to be in relationship. It might go something like this.

God I know I need you. I also know that there are mountains between us that I cannot climb over or move. I cannot make myself believe in you. Neither can I fix the most basic problems in my life. I need you to do what only you can do. I trust you (or want to trust) that Jesus can bring me over everything that separates us. I want him to do this, and I invite his Holy Spirit into my life to take control so this can happen. Make me able to trust that this work is happening in me day by day in spite of how I feel. Protect me from any attempts to destroy my faith or push me back to where I started. I pray this trusting not in myself, but in what Jesus did for me out of love. So be it. (Sailboat Church, p. 41)

Trusting in Jesus as the Lord of your life leads to freedom that is described in our passage today. Freedom is a feeling one can have when sailing with the wind. I am not discussing the freedom we have in our democracy while that is a gift for which to be grateful. And I am not talking about free license to do whatever one wants or what feels good. Those are what the Apostle Paul calls desires of the flesh. Paul describes Christian freedom as the freedom to submit to the demands of love. Trusting that we have justified by grace through faith, we are set free to sail in the Spirit and to love as God loves us. We are free to love with a love that is deep and wide, sacrificial and sacred, and strong even in its vulnerability. The Spirit led life produces fruits like Paul wrote here: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Maybe you have tasted some fruit lately like some SC peaches I received this week as a gift. I grew up around peach farms. Peaches, like all fruit, take cultivation. A peach farmer must have good soil quality, the right weather conditions, steady rain, and no pests to produce good fruit. A good freeze can destroy a peach crop. It is the same in our faith. We must have good conditions to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit.

I want to suggest four practices that cultivate a Spirit led faith. There are more, but for today, we will focus on four. Practices: Prayer, Bible Study, Obedience, and Holy Conversations.

1. Prayer is the mainsail of our faith for what is a relationship with God without communication. If you never spoke or listened to your loved one, would you have much of a relationship anymore? Prayer is how we practice the presence of God. And it is so much more than talking, demanding. Prayer is an attitude of receiving. We pause not to spew a laundry list of wants and needs. Sometimes the most important prayer is listening for God speaking. Now, for most of us, God does not speak to us like a person, but for the person of faith, there is a knowing. There is a sense of guidance from the Spirit at times. Ultimately, prayer is holding our hands out, open to receiving what it is God wants to accomplish through us. It is our way of aligning ourselves with God's will. Jesus taught his disciples this when he taught them and us to pray the Lord's Prayer especially "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Bit by bit as we intentionally pray this prayer, we are changed into persons who want God to be the center of our lives.

This week I received a text from Maggie Alsup with these words from her daily devotion. Listen as though God is speaking these words to you.

Many a ship has sailed from port to port with no interference from Me, because Strong Will has been at the wheel.

Multitudes of pleasure cruises go merrily on their ways untouched by the power of My hand.

But you have put your life into My keeping and because you are depending on Me for guidance and direction, I shall give it.

Move on steadily, and know that the waters that carry you are the waters of My love and My kindness, and I will keep you on the right course.ⁱⁱ (Frances J. Roberts)

Prayer is our mainsail. Listening is the most important way we pray.

2. Bible study- Spirit led sailors spend time in God's word. Bible study helps us see how God's Spirit has acted in the lives of those who have gone before us. And Bible Study is best done with others. That community of the faithful can be the living, breathing brothers and sisters in this church. But it also includes the faithful scholars of our church tradition who have studied the Scripture.

As Presbyterian-type Christians we believe in the authority of Scripture. And we have rules of interpretation which many of you have studied. These rules were not made up, but emerge from our 12 Confessions which describe our theology. So as we study, we stand in a long line of faithful Christians seeking to understand what the Spirit is saying to the church today. And we are gifted with guidance from our tradition to help us do this. Presbyterian Christians believe like the early church father, Augustine, that we have "a faith that seeks understanding." We have a thinking faith. And we serve God with our minds as well as our heart and hands.

In Hebrew the word for "know" is the word "to eat." To know God's word is to ingest it until it becomes part of you, bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh. This is the way we cultivate the fruits of the Spirit as opposed to the flesh. We must consume God's word, chew on it. We have a faith that seeks understanding.

I have found that I cannot go to the Bible as an answer book, but as I read the Bible regularly in community (mainly as I prepare sermons and study weekly) things going on in my life or in the church or in our world take on meaning. It starts by first being in the word, being immersed in Scripture. Then Scripture becomes a lens like a set of glasses that help me see things that God would want me to see. I have found that most people start with what they see in the world and then make meaning. They are immersed in the 24 hour news cycle or the sensational story of the day or the gossip around town rather than immersed in Scripture. When we are "in the word" God is center to our life. We begin to see the world as God sees the world. Spirit-led Christians read and study the Bible. Bible Study is another way the fruits of God's Spirit can be cultivated in us.

3. Which leads to another practice- Obedience. Sailing requires that we acknowledge God as sovereign and turn over our lives to God. For Christians, we have only one Captain and Master- God. Obedience has negative connotations in our culture, but for Christians, obedience is a joy chosen in freedom. We serve because we follow Jesus who came not to be served but to serve. We see in his life a total obedience and trust that was offered in sacrificial love. We know that what God has planned for us is the best for us. And we know that the Kingdom of God is so much more important than our desires. We are simply on the crew of the Sailboat. We are partners with God in God's mission here on earth.

Sometimes that means setting aside our vision or desire to be a part of what God is doing. When we become disciples, we take on the yoke that Jesus offers. The yoke is a sign of serving and submission. Jesus tells disciples, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30)

Obedience is how we cultivate the fruits of the Spirit. By being connected to God in prayer and Bible study, we discern what God is calling us to do and be. The fruits of the Spirit are evident in obedient Christians.

4. And finally the fourth way to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit is by being in holy conversations. Yes, this means knowing other Christians and talking about matters of life and faith together. That requires that we invest in relationships with other Christians. We have to be open, vulnerable, committed to build relationships.

In late May we had the Rev. Mark Tidsworth preach in worship. Mark led a retreat for leaders in our church that weekend to help us focus on our mission in today's world. We discussed the Shifts happening in our culture and churches. We discussed ways to live our mission as Fort Hill church as we

glorify God, grow disciples and meet human needs. As an outgrowth of that retreat, this summer we have a couple of Shift small groups with officers using Mark's companion devotional book. Why? Holy conversations help us as disciples, but our leaders must lead the way for the church. We are engaging in small groups that will bear fruit for God's work through us. This fall you will be invited to do the same using the Shifts Field Guide and engaging in the conversation as we advance God's mission at Fort Hill church in today's world. If you want to dive in, you can join us on Sundays during the Bridge hour or on Thursdays at noon. Find me or elder Donna McCubbin if you are interested.

Holy Conversations help us determine which way the winds are blowing. They help us discerning God's will for our church, our lives.

We were created for sailing for experiencing freedom in Jesus Christ. Spirit led sailors cultivate practices that allow the Spirit to grow good fruit in their lives. So this week consider where you might be in your faith and trust. Then commit to prayer, bible study, obedience, and holy conversations with other disciples. Then even when the waters get rough, God will provide all you need for the journey.

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ⁱ Joan S. Gray, *Sailboat Church; Helping your Church Rethink its Mission and Practice*, (Louisville; Westminster John-Knox, 2014)

ⁱⁱ Frances J. Roberts, *Celtic Daily Prayer Book Two; Farther Up and Farther In*, William Collins pub.