

## ***Gifts of the Spirit & YOU***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on the First Sunday of Lent

February 21, 2021

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Galatians 5:22-23 & Romans 14:13-22

Welcome to the first Sunday of Lent, the 40 days and nights (exclusive of Sundays) which lead up to Easter Sunday. This 40 day period of time is intended to recall Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness immediately following his baptism by John in the Jordan River. We talked about Jesus' temptation, as his 40 day sojourn in the wilderness is often called, last Sunday, looking at it through the framework of healing which has been our focus during Epiphanytide. Now, this Sunday, we have already embarked on our journey into the Lenten experience, whatever we have decided it will be. I didn't know much about Lent growing up in a little Presbyterian Church as I did. Lent really wasn't observed there. But, the community I grew up in outside Pittsburgh had a sizeable Catholic community so Lent was a huge big deal for most of my friends. I can remember my girl friends making a big deal about coming to school with ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday, while the boys usually just complained about no meat on Fridays. For reasons I never quite understood, my mother did observe meatless Fridays during Lent throughout my childhood. When I asked her about it once she mumbled something about it being the "least we could do" to thank Jesus for saving us from our sins. This answer didn't mean much to the 8 year old me who asked the question, so I never bothered to ask again, accepting meatless Fridays as a "thing" during Lent.

Over the years, I have grown quite fond of Lent, even in the years before I entered ministry as a profession. I just liked the idea of a period of time devoted to connecting intentionally with God on a deeper level than I usually would. My prayer life as a teen undoubtedly took root for the first time during Lent, and then progressed into being the anchor point of my life year round. Lent became a time of curiosity, a time for reading the Bible and other religious texts. I also experimented with the whole notion of giving something up, or taking something on. Over the years I've used prepared Lenten devotionals and I've winged it on my own. I've journaled and meditated and allowed myself to plumb the depths of Lent, often with mixed results due to my lack of follow through, especially the year I tried to fast on Fridays, a discipline which did not mix well with my diagnosed hypoglycemia. Still, I discovered for myself the true purpose of Lent – reminding us of just how very human we are. If we allow it, if we have the

courage to take on the possibilities, Lent is the time each year to take stock of our lives and how we are living them in the reality of God's love for us. In the final analysis, Lent is the time when we measure who we are against the possibilities of who we could be, if we lived life fully as someone unconditionally beloved of God.

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul is doing in both of the texts we read this morning. He is explaining to the people of the early churches he established what it means in practical purposes to live as one who has been gifted with the unconditional love of God as taught and made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, Paul is explaining how being a person who follows Jesus is to live life each day as a person transformed by that relationship. In the text from Galatians, Paul is confronting a rather nasty argument which had developed within the church in Galatia. This argument was really about who would be accepted into the "Jesus movement" or "the Way" as it was known at the time. Important to know here is that Jesus never intended to start a new religion. His intent was always to reform Judaism by helping the leadership to see that their focus on "the Law" and the legalistic performance of rituals was misplaced. So initially, Jesus spoke almost exclusively to Jewish groups. But, he soon realized that his message resonated deeply with everybody and Jesus welcomed all into his gatherings. Fast forward to the years after Jesus' death when leadership had shifted to the apostles, Paul among them although the others did not consider him a "real" apostle. A question arose in several of the earliest churches that proved quite divisive in several of them, the ones in Galatia, Rome and Jerusalem among them. The question was this: Did Gentiles (non-Jews) have to convert to Judaism before they could be admitted into the Jesus Movement? A requirement of conversion would mean not only a period of prolonged study of the Law, but also circumcision for males. Several of the apostles – James the brother of Jesus among them – said absolutely yes. Paul said absolutely no. The ones who said yes felt this was needed because they were still focused on Jesus' original intention to reform Judaism. Paul, a faithful practicing Jew, didn't care about this at all. To him the Gentiles had already received the gift of God's unconditional love when they agreed to live their lives as followers of the Risen Christ. Nothing else was needed, Paul said.

Understanding this disagreement is crucial to understanding who Paul was and why he wrote what he wrote in all the epistles or letters sent to the churches he started all over the Mediterranean world. Key to Paul's understanding was the whole notion of one's life being transformed by committing one's life to live as a

follower of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. Paul exhorts these early Christians to be transformed by what he called the fruits or gifts of the Spirit. Paul calls them fruits because he believed that if you fully welcomed God as incarnate in Jesus Christ into your life, you would naturally bear the fruits of a transformed life. He even gives us a list of what these fruits are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Put another way, Paul is arguing that if you allow the Holy Spirit of God to become part of who you are, these fruits would be yours naturally as you grow in Christ, like a tree taking roots and bearing fruit as the years pass. A beautiful image to be sure. I also think of these as gifts of the Spirit – gifts because they come to each of us straight from the heart of Jesus, the source of them all. Now this isn't to say there aren't some very wonderful folks out there who do not think of themselves as Christian and who do exhibit Paul's list of what amounts to traits that make for a good person. Of course, there are people who exhibit all these traits. But, what is the source of these traits for them? Is it just a desire to be a nice person, a good person? Doesn't that imply that some day you could just wake up and decide not to be a good person? Seems like we've experienced at least a little of this over the last four years as people we thought we knew became entirely different people, willing to look the other way and turn their backs on evil too much of the time. Could it be that these gifts of the Spirit actually do require the Holy Spirit to withstand the trials and tribulations of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This is the question we shall explore during these next four Sundays of Lent – what are these gifts of the Spirit really, and how is God, how is Jesus, inviting us to incorporate them into our lives more fully as people beloved of God?

This is a rather unusual subject for a Lenten sermon series, I admit. Even more unusual is my desire to do this by exploring what the Epistles, the New Testament letters of the early church, have to say about this whole idea. A more typical approach to Lent is to focus on Gospel passages and particular moments in the life and ministry of Christ. But, I feel like we've done that, a lot, while the Epistles remain unknown territory for most of us. That's what intrigues me about them, and I suspect it will intrigue you as well. The Epistles are the earliest written records of what the first followers of Jesus encountered as they created the system which we now call the church. This very system is what we now rely on today to learn about, practice and live our faith in an increasingly unchristian world. These earliest followers of Jesus struggled with many of the same issues we struggle with today – who is a good person and who isn't; how do you deal

with people who say one thing and do another; what does it really mean to live life the way Jesus taught it should be lived. That's why in the weeks ahead, we'll be exploring Paul's fruits of the Spirit through the lens of his letters and those written by others within the early church. And we begin today with the first three gifts on Paul's list; love, joy and peace; and how Paul helped the church in Rome come to grips with their true meaning in a rather mundane way.

The church in Rome was having a dispute among its members over, of all things, who was eating what kind of food. They argued over who ate meat and who didn't, who ate foods that some of them considered unclean and who didn't. Some folks even tried to argue they were better than others simply because of what they would and would not eat. In the passage we read from Romans a little bit ago, Paul tells them in no uncertain terms that this is ridiculous. "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." God does not care what you eat and drink, Paul says. God cares about whether or not you are living a righteous life, a life in accordance with the love of each other which is foundational to how we love God. It is this love that makes possible the peace and joy we all long for in life.

Paul also makes another very interesting and important point here, though. No, what you eat and drink does not matter to God, he says BUT what does matter to God is if what you eat or drink brings harm to another. If eating meat or drinking wine will cause someone else to fall away from God, then don't do it! "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat," Paul says. Now, this sounds strange to us. How could eating a particular food make someone fall away from Christ? Hard to imagine, I know. But then, I remember meatless Fridays and I think about my mom's long ago answer to my question about why we observed meatless Fridays if we weren't Catholic. She said it was the least we could do. And she was right. Think about it this way. If you have a dear friend or family member who is vegan, you wouldn't invite them over for a pig roast, would you? I hope not! Why not? Because it would not be a loving thing to do. It would not be a respectful thing to do. It would not bring that person peace or joy. It would only upset and deeply offend them. This is Paul's point. If your choice of food is offensive, hurtful to someone, and you claim to be a Christian, you are not giving them a very good example of what being a Christian means, are you?

This whole food and drink thing actually plays out in churches all the time, well, at least in pre-Covid days. Think about it. Churches have deeply held beliefs about whether or not wine or grape juice should be served for Communion. And we have already decided to serve gluten free bread for Communion. We've also had the decaf or regular coffee at social hour conversation as well as the healthy snacks or just sugary baked goods one. Amazing isn't it? Paul was, in a very real way, writing about an issue we still struggle with in the church today: What should we eat? What should we drink? At Communion? At social hour? Dear ones, these are real questions as familiar to us as they were to Paul two millennia ago. And what does love have to do with any of it? Everything, just like Paul said it did. Because the details like the food and drink we offer in worship and in hospitality reveal the love at the foundation of our church, just like they did Paul's. It is these kinds of details, caringly decided on together, that build the foundation of love from which the joy and peace of this church become visible to all who come near. These mundane details of life together reveal who we are as the Beloved Community of Jesus Christ, a community that works at being inclusive rather than exclusive. I, for one, think that's pretty incredible. How about you? And I can't wait for social hour to return, by the way... Amen.