

Let's Get Fruity!

Galatians 5:1:13-25

CWZepp, BWCOB, June 30, 2019

As a worship planner, I often get asked why we follow the Revised Common Lectionary. It certainly isn't perfect – like any worship or devotional reading plan it can get stale, and it has its biases in emphasis and choosing. It selectively cuts out much “undesirable” and troubling scripture content (just take a look at the verses skipped over in today's reading) and whole parts of the Bible are never read at all, especially in the Hebrew scriptures.

But there are also advantages, and there are three that I especially appreciate:

1) Having a common set of readings in which much of the Christian communion grounds itself in worship each week provides a synchronicity that is valuable in and of itself. Commentaries and other established resources, online networks connecting worship planners and sharing ideas, and periodicals that bring timely and contextual insights provide a rich foundation not only for worship planning and sermon preparation but also for individual and group studies such as our own *Sitting in the Gap*. Likewise, it creates the potential for persons and groups from different communities of faith, or even in different worshipping or study groups within a single congregation to have a common basis for conversation, study, and devotion.

2) As a preacher and worship planner, it gives me accountability beyond myself. It helps to check my biases and keeps me from simply choosing favorite texts of my own by assigning the readings according to a cyclical three year pattern. Rather than finding scriptures to support what I want to talk about, it challenges me to discern what the assigned texts for a given week might have to say to us. That challenge has proven a life-giving discipline for me in scripture study and reflection, and hopefully also for those of you who hear the preaching that evolves from it.

3) It has happened often enough that I can't dismiss it as mere coincidence...without any intentionality or effort on my part, an assigned text proves to be exactly the word that I or my community needed to hear. Sometimes it is a word of comfort in troubling times. Sometimes it is a synchronistic or complimentary word that deepens or furthers energy or investments already made. And sometimes it is a word of challenge or conviction. More often than not, it is the latter for me, and I want to share one such time with you today.

The year was 2004. June. 15 years ago. (Precisely five lectionary cycles ago for those who are keeping track). I had been the Associate Pastor at the Mountville Church of the Brethren for nearly a year, having previously served as an intentional two-year Interim Pastor of Youth at the Lancaster Church of the Brethren before spending a year in volunteer service at Gould Farm in Massachusetts. Amanda and I had bought our first home and were settling into our early life as a two-income, married-with-two-cats family. At 25 years old, I had just completed my first year of seminary studies, and was starting to find my groove as a well-rounded minister.

It had not been easy. Since experiencing a strong sense of call to ministry in high school and early college and being licensed by my home congregation and district, a growing disquiet and love-hate relationship with the church had colored my pastoral experience. There were good

days and there were bad days as there are in any job, but the biggest question for me was whether or not I could accept the fish-bowl existence of pastoral life. You see, I had always considered myself a bit of a free spirit – you know, marching to the beat of my own drum. It often externalized itself in the way I dressed (I went through both a beret wearing phase and bandana wearing phase in college!), but it was always deeper than that. I was never content to accept things the way they were, or do things the way they had always been done, or was told they should be done. I felt compelled to buck the system, ask tough questions, and take stands on even simple issues that no one else thought mattered, just on principle.

But this kind of personality and internal wiring presented a problem for me in ministry. You may or may not know it, but the church is not generally a great home for free thinkers. It has become, in many ways, a cultural gatekeeper – a sacred guardian of our cultural norms and status quo. It's full of good people who do nice things together on Sunday mornings and occasionally at other times, but it's probably not the place to plant yourself if you are an idealist wanting to change the world or even just a guy wanting to try doing things a bit differently. So after two years in pastoral ministry, I had gone to Massachusetts with no plans to return to the ministry. Not because I didn't feel called or because I was experiencing doubts or anything of substance, but because I was tired of living under the microscope and the constant judgement of the church. Frankly, I was tired of having to defend the pants I wore every single cotton-pickin' Sunday.

But volunteer service had given me a new sense of call, along with a new determination to find or forge my own unique path in pastoral ministry. So I committed to the first cohort of the new distance learning program at Bethany Seminary and received a new call to the Mountville Church of the Brethren that would allow me to both serve and study concurrently. And internally, I committed myself to not letting the church kill my free spirit, to not let go of what makes me, me. I committed to continuing to ask tough questions, to not being afraid to speak the truth as I understood it, and to bucking the system as needed, even though I was part of that system.

So that was the plan. And things were going pretty well that first year. But then something happened one June Thursday evening 15 years ago that threatened to unravel it all. That was the evening on which the church Leadership Team gathered together for a meeting that was supposed to feature discussion about the recent future planning session of the church. Before that discussion could take place, however, the Leadership Team had a few items of routine business that needed attention. One of those items – don't even remember what it was – turned into a lengthy heated discussion (a polite way of saying "argument") between the Moderator of the congregation and yours truly. The rest of the Leadership Team was held hostage and the meeting was hijacked so that in the end, the planned discussion on the future of the church had to be postponed for a month because of our argument. I don't know about anyone else, but I went home bitter and angry, and found it difficult to sleep that night.

But as fate would have it, I was responsible for bringing the message in worship that Sunday, and so Friday morning I got up fairly early, still reeling a little bit from the meeting the night before, and dutifully went to work and tried to turn my mind to the task in front of me. And what Lectionary text do you think was waiting on my desktop for me that morning? Yep – Galatians 5. Next thing you know I am sitting at my desk reading these words...

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

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh, for what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit.

Paul then lists the "works of the flesh", and I couldn't help but notice that the list included things such as enmity, strife, anger, quarrels, and dissensions. Commentators would point out that even though we are quick to associate "works of the flesh" with sexual sins, a majority of the behaviors in Paul's vice list (8 out of 15) are actually about conflict in one way or another.¹ And there is a good reason – one of the primary motivations for Paul's writing to the Galatian church was to speak into the conflict that was brewing there over whether Gentile believers had to follow the Jewish law.

I continue reading:

By contrast the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...and those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Thank you Lectionary. It's not every day that you get your rear-end handed to you by the scriptures. But sometimes we need a good swift kick in the spiritual butt to recognize the error of our ways. On in that week back in 2004, the Lectionary gave me just that. So after sitting with the scripture for a time on Friday morning, I picked up the phone – an action which anyone who knows me recognizes as extraordinary in itself – and called brother Tom, our Moderator, and asked if we could get together to talk. We did, and I requested and received his forgiveness for my attitude and disruptive behavior in the meeting. He did likewise, and it was given. And before I left, I received his permission to speak directly to our congregation about our experience. That Sunday, I made my public confession to our congregation, and asked for their forgiveness as well, calling us all to live and be guided more by the Spirit, as I was challenged to do in my own study.

That is the last time I preached on this scripture, and the experience still haunts me. It was in the context of that humbling experience that Paul's words moved from being the stuff of cute Sunday School songs to challenging and personal words by which I am called to live. And I wish that I could say I've learned my lesson, but the truth is that I find myself needing to ask forgiveness for my lack of "fruitiness" more often than I care to admit. I would give just about anything to be more kind and gentle on a regular basis. Peace is often elusive for one such as myself who feels called to challenge the status quo. And patience is one of the most frustrating waiting games ever; Can't tell you how many times I have prayed the prayer, "God, give me patience, and give it to me RIGHT NOW!"

¹ Charles B. Cousar. *Galatians. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (1982) pp. 136-138.

There is a wonderful scene in the movie *Evan Almighty* that speaks to this reality.² If you haven't seen the movie, it is basically a modern-day parable on the story of Noah. God calls newly elected congressman Evan Baxter (played by Steve Carell) to build an ark in his suburban neighborhood. When Evan's wife Joan (played by Lauren Graham) becomes understandably confused and shaken by the odd behavior of her husband, she decides to take some time away to sort it out.

On her way out of town, she and their children stop at a restaurant where God shows up (played by Morgan Freeman of course!) and serves as their waiter, complete with a nametag reading "Al Mighty." While the children are away from the table, the Al Mighty engages Joan in conversation. He has noticed that she is troubled and asks if she is okay. She tells him about her husband and his ark, and asks for advice. What should she do with the challenge she has received of a husband who seems at least slightly crazy?

The waiter/God offers this beautiful thought: *"If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience? Or does [God] give them the opportunity to be patient?" If they prayed for courage, does God give them courage, or does [God] give them opportunities to be courageous? "If someone asked for their family to be closer,"* (which is precisely Joan's prayer throughout the movie) *"do you think God zaps them with warm, fuzzy feelings? Or does [God] give them opportunities to love each other?"*

If you are anything like me, one of the dangers of reading scripture is that you quickly wind up feeling guilty and inadequate because you just don't measure up to that "calling to which you have been called."³ Such is how I often feel when I compare my own life Paul's fruit of the Spirit. But we need to remember that fruit doesn't just show up – it is grown. It arises when the soil has been nurtured, seeds have been planted, and time has brought ripening. And while we would all like for the fruit of the Spirit to suddenly and miraculously appear in our lives, it doesn't work that way. To borrow the phrasing of Al Mighty, such fruit isn't "zapped" into our lives. Rather, we are given the opportunities to allow them to grow within us.

The longer I live, the more I realize that there aren't any shortcuts to growth. It is hard and often painful work, and mistakes will surely be made. Sometimes there is even pruning that must be done. But in the process, we are given the opportunities in which we can cultivate the fruit that comes from being guided more and more by the Spirit.

So friends, let's get fruity! It won't be easy and it won't happen overnight – we all need to be in it for the long haul. But together, I believe we can and will produce a bountiful harvest!

² Oedekerker, Steve. *Evan Almighty*. Universal Pictures. 2007. [youtube.com/watch?v=Ikes4yPulmI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ikes4yPulmI).

³ Ephesians 4:1