

Text: Galatians 5:13-26

Title: "Two Communities"

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The church has always been messed up.

There was a trend in church planting and in numerous ministry books a few decades back that emphasized returning to the model of the early church like that depicted in Acts 2. There's those few well known verses that describes this ideal, pristine community of believers. Where everything was shared among believers. They were devoted to Scripture and to each other. They saw each other everyday for worship and to have dinner together. And they praised God continually and, we're told, the young church "enjoyed the favour of all the people."

Which sounds lovely. And so church plant after church plant, congregation after congregation, said, we're gonna be the ones to get back to that early church model and erase all the division and conflict that has plagued the church in the 2000 years since that Acts 2 community.

And, not surprisingly, this return-to-the-ideal-early-church became a trend in church planting rather than a sweeping renewal giving birth to conflict-free and pristine communities of believers.

Because, except for five verses there in Acts 2, the church has always been messed up.

In Acts 15, just a few chapters later, the early church is already embroiled in their first divisive and contentious council meeting where Peter and Paul argue with each other about who is in and who is out in the church and who has to do what to make the cut.

And then there's the simple fact that the majority of the New Testament comes to us because of conflict and division in the first communities of followers of Jesus.

There isn't a model of an ideal pristine community of believers for us to return to, because the church has always been messed up.

Almost every single letter of Paul is written as an exasperated pastor to a conflict-riddled congregation. And his letter to the Galatian churches is not the exception. In fact it's about the harshest letter that we have from Paul. Usually Paul starts his letter by taking the time to give thanks to God for the people he's writing to, not here. At all. He basically says a quick "Grace and peace" and launches into his deep disappointment with this community of believers.

A crop of new teachers and preachers is making inroads in the Galatian community with their teaching and sermons on returning to the demands of the Law. They accuse Paul of teaching too loose a gospel that doesn't give good enough guard rails for right living and pleasing God. Paul

preaches a grace too free to be helpful. And so this new teaching offers clear boundaries and lines of who is in and who is out by outward bodily signs like circumcision.

And the Galatian community is being torn apart - by those following the teaching of Paul and a gospel of grace rooted in Jesus, and those who follow the new teachers and their clear call to return to the rules and regulations of the Law over the freedom of the Cross.

We get a glimpse of how nasty the conflict has gotten in the Galatian community when Paul is making a case for serving one another in love in verse 13 and then describes the current state of the Galatian church as a pack of wild dogs attacking each other:

If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by one another.

And you get a sense of how frustrated Paul is by their infighting and arguing and departure from the gospel and with those getting circumcised to obey the Law when just before our passage this morning, Paul declares with an exasperated cry in verse 12:

As for those agitators, well, I wish they would just go the whole way and castrate themselves!

Which doesn't really sound like a shining pastoral example of the fruit of the Spirit. Paul's words do not sound either kind or gentle or show much self-control.

The Galatian church is messed up. Conflict-riddled. Divided and divisive. They are destroying their community. Biting and devouring each other. Arguing about who is in and who is out. And even Paul is on the verge of losing his calm.

The church has always been messed up.

In the Reformed tradition, we're children of the Protestant Reformation and are prone by theology and culture to split. To divide. To schism. It's in our ecclesiastical nature. But we don't have to go back to the 16th century for evidence of our divisions.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of women's ordination as ministers of the word in our denomination. It's an anniversary that marks for some a great joy and others a great sorrow. And for most of us both emotions. Because however you feel about the outcome, the conflict over women's ordination ripped families and congregations down the middle.

I know some folks who still don't talk to former friends because the theological divide is just too great between them.

I know people my own age who lost their faith watching the way their parents and church leaders and pastors fought and divided. The church is just too messed up and they walked away from the blood bath.

The battle to be right got ugly and personal and destroyed so much.

And there is a growing sense of anxiety and dread as our denomination braces for the upcoming fight over the Human Sexuality Report going to Synod in June.

Battle-lines are being drawn. Overtures being written. And many fear that we're heading for fight that won't just leave us bloodied and bruised like women's ordination, but that will spell the end of our denomination. That we'll split up into even smaller fragments.

One of our youngest members who joined a Dive Into Doctrine small group this past spring, as we read the Human Sexuality Report and began to engage with it and listen to each other, signed up because she wanted to see how the church talks about difficult stuff. She wanted to see how we talk about difficult stuff. How we argue. How we disagree. How we do the hard stuff. We have a generation watching how we fight. And how we fight has consequences.

Will we bite and devour each other and so destroy each other and so much more along with us?

Here in Galatians 5, before Paul offers up his list of the fruit of the Spirit, he shares a different list, one that is meant to be heard alongside its more well-known companion list:

The works of the flesh.

The works of the flesh is a litany of stuff that he says won't get you into the kingdom of God. And usually we hear "works of the flesh" and instantly think of sexual immorality and only sexual immorality, but that's not the whole picture. Or even most of the picture.

While Paul mentions sexual immorality and impurity in this list along with orgies and debauchery, witchcraft and idolatry, the majority of his list is dedicated to all the common and ordinary ways we are inclined to destroy each other in community:

hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy

And the fact that these community-destroying works of the flesh are so common place and ordinary, well, that just goes to prove the Heidelberg Catechism when it says that we have a "natural tendency to hate our neighbour." (Q+A 5). That comes naturally. And easily. And we're real good at justifying that hatred. Especially when it comes to thinking we're right on a theological point and the one we hate is dead wrong.

The church has always been messed up - whether it's a first century Galatian congregation or a 21st century Canadian one - because it's made up of us.

Our human inclination to hate our neighbour.

Our quickness to snarl and bite and devour.

Our hatred, our discord, our anger, our dissension, our factions, our envy.

Us.

The church has always been messed up.

Which means that when Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, he's not talking to a pristine and ideal community of believers who always get along and share everything in common and worship in perfect harmony and never struggle with conflict or hatred or dissension or disagreement.

Not in the least.

Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit to a messed up church who needs it to hear it. Who needs a different vision for what's possible in a community beyond their snarling and biting and community-destroying works of the flesh.

And Paul isn't telling the Galatians to grow better fruit. To be more patient. To be more joyful. To be more faithful. Not directly. The direct command Paul gives to the contentious Galatians is

to serve one another humbly in love.

And here Paul points them to Jesus and his model of sacrifice and love and service. Paul reminds them that serving one another humbly in love requires crucifying the works of the flesh:

Killing the hatred that fills their heart.

Uprooting the anger that lashes out.

Weeding out the discord that comes so naturally to them.

And that work, that service, that way of humility, clears the ground for other things to grow. For the fruit of the Spirit to flourish in and build up the community of believers.

For love to grow.

For joy to take root.

For peace to spread.

For patience and kindness to ripen.

For faithfulness and gentleness and self-control to blossom.

One of the ways I've seen this service of humility and love in our own congregation is through the faithfulness of those who have stayed a part of this church family even as they disagree with women's ordination.

As this congregation called women to the offices of elder and deacon and then called women into the pulpit and the pastor's study, there are those in our own community of believers for whom this is hard and they deeply disagree. But instead of leaving, they have persisted. Praying for the leadership of their church - both women and men. Praying for their pastor regardless of gender.

This quiet faithfulness and commitment to the community of believers won't get a lot of press as we mark the 25th anniversary of women's ordination, but I will celebrate this act of faithfulness, this act of service done in humility and love. Because this is also what the fruit of the Spirit looks like in our midst.

It's true that church has always been messed up. That's undeniable. But it's also deeply true that the Spirit has always been at work bearing the good fruit of God in our life together:

of love and joy, of peace and patience, goodness and faithfulness, gentleness, and, yes, even self-control.

As we wrestle with how to disagree with one another, as we remember our bloody fights and wonder how in the world we will stay in step with the Spirit as a church and a denomination...

May the Spirit open our eyes to see the community-building fruit growing in our midst, even in those we disagree with.

May the Spirit convict us of where we have some work to do uprooting our own community-destroying inclinations and give us the strength to be honest with ourselves and humble in our service to others.

And may the Spirit draw our attention to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who holds us together as brothers and sisters, and who loves this beautiful and messed up and broken community of believers so much that he gave his life for us.

Thanks be to God.