**MCLC Lent Series: Making Change**

**2nd Wednesday in Lent, February 28, 2024**

**First Reading: Galatians 5:16-25**

**Gospel Reading: Luke 6:46-49**

**Sermon Title: *“Change of Habit”***

**Theme**

*Bad habits are hard to break. The letter to the Galatians urges us to replace them with the fruits of the Spirit. Love, patience, generosity, and self-control are just some of the good habits practiced by those whose foundation is built on Christ.*

**Texts:**

**Galatians 5:16-25**

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, 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.  
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.

**Luke 6:46-49**

46Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? 47I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. 48That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."

**Sermon**

Lucky me! I drew the Lenten Midweek topic of changing habits.

*You know, I was going to quit all my bad habits for the New Year, but then I remembered, that no one likes a quitter.*

*For the past 43 years, my wife has been complaining about me not putting the cap back on the toothpaste.*

*Last anniversary, I decided to change this bad habit and make my wife happy.*

*For a week, I was diligent, always capping the toothpaste. I was expecting my wife to thank me, but she never did it.*

*Finally last night, she turned and looked at me and asked, "Why have you stopped brushing your teeth?"*

*Why wouldn't a nun walk around in a bikini? Because it's a bad habit*

White board a list of bad habits

A little background into Paul’s letter to the Galatians might help us understand the challenge of our working title, *“Change of Habit.”*

Paul’s letter to the Christian fellowships of Galatia was written around 50-55 AD, or about twenty years after the Resurrection of Christ. These Christian fellowships were made up of Jewish proselytes and non-Jews (Gentiles). Paul had been there before this letter was written and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the believers had experienced the Holy Spirit.

However, other formerly Jewish leaders who had come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior had come to Galatia and preached another gospel, one that insisted that the Gentiles must observe the Law of Moses, which is tantamount to saying, one must become Jewish first, before becoming Christian. This has caused ill-will in the fellowship. And in this letter, Paul is all about correcting this misconception.

The repeated use of the word “law” in Paul’s letter to the Galatians refers to the Law of Moses. Observing the Law of Moses included observing Jewish food laws and festivals, and circumcision for men and boys – which might have been a deal-breaker in that day.

The folks at Zion love circumcision jokes.

*A priest, a Lutheran minister, and a rabbi want to see who’s best at his job.  
So they each go into the woods, find a bear, and attempt to convert it. Later they get together.*

*The priest begins, “When I found the bear, I read to him from the Catechism and sprinkled him with holy water. Next week is his First Communion.”*

*“I found a bear by the stream,” says the Lutheran minister, “and preached God’s holy words of grace to him for hours. The bear was so mesmerized that he let me baptize him.”*

*They both look down at the rabbi, who is lying on a gurney in a body cast. “Looking back,” he says, “maybe I shouldn’t have started with the circumcision.”*

Earlier in the letter, Paul goes to great lengths to explain to them how he fought with Peter and the other apostles for the inclusion of Gentiles within the fellowship of Christians. Then he reminds the Galatians that many of them have already received the Holy Spirit. That frustrates him because he can’t figure out why they deny the freedom that comes from the Spirit in them and seek enslavement through obedience to the Law. Those foolish Galatians!

Now to our First Reading.

The “works of the flesh” are behaviors that are pursued to satisfy our human nature. Paul lists just fifteen of them in verses 19-21. These may or may not be listed among the 613 commandments listed in the Law of Moses, and that is Paul’s point. If we live by the Law were are captive to it.

Remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan? You will recall that a priest and a Levite saw the mugged man lying on the side of the road and passed by on the other side. The primary reason they did that was not because they didn’t have compassion for the man. Leviticus 15 indicates that the ancient Israelites thought blood was the life of a person, and to touch human blood would render one ritually unclean and therefore unfit for their religious responsibilities. So you see, to live by the Law is to be captive by it. The Law prevented the priest and the Levite from any demonstration of compassion.

By contrast, Paul strongly suggests living by the fruit of the Spirit. These behaviors are motivated by, and inspired by the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer. He lists just nine of them, (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) but let’s not limit the work of the Holy Spirit. Back to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it was the Good Samaritan who was motivated by those behaviors Paul listed. The fruit of the Spirit is the life-output of the believer. Paul writes, 25If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Now, my task is to talk about “Change of Habit.” I don’t want to get into your personal business, but probably all of us to some degree are ‘gratifying the desires of our flesh’ as Paul put it. In our human nature, it is difficult, if not impossible not to. But they are not of God and not of the Spirit, and while, in my opinion, our country seems to be on a moral decline and therefore none of those fifteen behaviors are illegal in the US, they are certainly sinful, and that forces God to turn his back on us, and I don’t think any of us want that.

Back to the opening verses of this passage, Paul writes,

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.

So therefore, those fifteen behaviors and a nearly limitless list of behaviors we can think of that Paul couldn’t have conceived of, are opposed to the Spirit, the third person of the Trinitarian godhead. Paul names them to give us guardrails against bad behavior. As followers of Jesus, we shouldn’t do *anything we want* – which by the way, is exactly the message our culture says it’s totally okay!

I am a big fan of the expression WWJD? What Would Jesus Do? Because it’s a great question! And Jesus wouldn’t do anything on this list! Furthermore, no one who claims Jesus as Lord should want to do them either! And yet, we probably all do some of them. Thank Jesus for grace right?

Paul admonishes the reader to *change our habits* from this list to his list of the Fruit of the Spirit.

“Oh pastor, you don’t know how long I have struggled with (fill in the blank). If it was easy I would have already done it.” I know, brother. I know, sister. The laying on of hands at ordination did not come with an invisible force field that repels temptation or prevents me from engaging in bad habits.

Paul didn’t have one either. In 2 Corinthians, he thanks God for his “thorn in the flesh” because it keeps him humble. And so he writes,

2 Corinthians 12:9I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10Therefore I am content with weaknesses, … for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

James, the brother of Jesus also had this to say:

James 1:2My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

Using their example, in my own personal devotions, I do as they say, and thank God for my thorns in the flesh, because they keep me humble, and every time I overcome them I give glory to God, and having overcome them once, overcoming them the second time becomes a little easier.

But back to changing our bad habits, Paul offers a non-exclusive list of good habits that he calls the Fruit of the Spirit. They are not limited to *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. Let’s see how many we can come up with that are not on this list – be as specific or general as you wish.

White board list of good habits

*Uplifting, encouraging, praying for someone else, being considerate, listening, hugging,*

Don’t we agree that all that has been mentioned, would be *what Jesus would do*, and pleasing to God? It's not me asking really, it's Jesus in the Gospel Reading. Specifically, he asks,

46Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?

Then he uses the example of a well-constructed house with a sturdy foundation that will withstand any storm as a metaphor for those who do as he says. Conversely, there is the mobile home up on cinder blocks (no offense to anyone who lives in a mobile home). The storms come, and they will, and all is lost.

How would you describe yourself?

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Then let's make a change. Let’s exchange our bad habits for ones that are God-honoring. A change from the selfish sinner we were born to be, to the saint we are baptized and set free to be, guided by the Holy Spirit.

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, during this Lenten season when you have our attention to a greater degree, circumcise our hearts so that in all we do we become more like you. Draw us ever closer into your Spirit’s tether so that we are inspired to do what you would do. We pray this in your holy name. Amen