

# Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity: Galatians 5:16–26

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Preached for the Third Sunday after Pentecost · 2019

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In our Old Testament reading, we heard about a burned out and dejected prophet Elijah who seems to have lost his way in the face of threats from Queen Jezebel. In the Gospel, we hear about three potential disciples whom Jesus seems to brush off as He sets His face to Jerusalem and His Good Friday cross. We're not prophets like Elijah. We're not potential recruits for discipleship. We're baptized believers in Christ. We have been given to follow Jesus. Our struggle is not with the Jezebel's of this world, though it may seem to be that way at times. Rather, our struggle is deep within us, a spiritual struggle of Flesh and Spirit.

As baptized believers, we are doubly-birthed. We have two mothers and fathers. We are flesh born of Flesh, born of our mothers and begotten of our fathers. And we are spirit born of Spirit, begotten by the Spirit in the water of Baptism and born of our holy mother, the Church. We have two identities. We are both in Adam and in Christ. And these two are at war with each other. The war rages inwardly, a spiritual struggle of Flesh vs Spirit. Adam vs Christ. Old vs new. Sinner vs saint.

“For the desires of the Flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the Flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” That means you are not as good as you could be in Christ; but you're also not as bad as you might be were you only in Adam. When I look back on the sixty-two years of my life, I'm thankful for my baptismal birth when I was five weeks old. Things could have been so much worse had not the Spirit of Christ been restraining me all these years.

Flesh produces works: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. Though we may not see all of these at work in us all the time, we always see some of them. You can probably add a few more to the list, if you are honest. Old Adam is always there. Even now, as you sit here in church, he's busy with his distractions, or admiring how

good you are to be here, how attentive you are, how prayerful your thoughts are. He's thankful that you are not others "out there" with their pride parades and their unbridled lust and greed.

What you see in others is at work in you. There's no holier than thou when it comes to Sin and the Flesh. We're all in the same boat together. What you deplore in others is at work in you. Perhaps that's why you deplore it so much. You see yourself in the sin of others, and you don't like the sight of it. Because of Sin's corruption, our flesh born of Flesh, old Adam, cannot inherit the kingdom of God. You as you are in the Flesh cannot inherit the kingdom. And there's no fixing old Adam. There's no twelve-step program for the Sin-addicted. The only cure is to die and rise. And the only way to die and rise to life is to be united with Jesus. We can't die and rise on our own.

You are not just flesh born of Flesh, however. You are spirit born of Spirit. You are born anew from above. Baptized children of God. The Spirit, who is always active and working in you, does not produce works. The Spirit produces fruit. Fruit and works are not the same thing. The Law produces works; the Spirit makes fruit. Fruit is life. Fruit is something you don't work for; the tree does all the work. You just take and eat.

I have a Santa Rosa plum tree in my front yard. It hasn't produced much of anything almost ten years. But the combination of cold and wet this winter brought a bumper crop of plums. I didn't even have to climb a ladder to pick them. Most of them just fell at my feet like manna in the wilderness. Every morning and evening this week, I just picked up plums off the front lawn. More than I could eat. I had to give some away to the neighbors. All of it free. Even some of the birds got to eat a few, and I didn't think of chasing them away.

The Spirit produces fruit in us. That's the Christ life hidden within us. The apostle Paul said this earlier in Galatians: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." The same apostle Paul who said that nothing good lived in his Flesh could also claim that he was dead to the Flesh and Sin for all intents and purposes, and that Christ lived in him. And where Christ is, there the Father is. And where Father and Son are, there the Spirit is bearing His fruit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against these, there is no law, and no law can produce them.

The Spirit's fruit is always there for you to pluck, fully ripe and ready. The Spirit is always at work in us, and we can't say we don't have these things unless we wish to say we don't have

the Spirit, but our Baptism testifies to the contrary. You are baptized. You have the Spirit of Christ at work in you. Christ lives in you. The fruit of the Spirit is there for you to take, eat, and enjoy.

This is the great hidden mystery of the life of the disciple of Jesus. Sanctification is not exercise in teeth gritting commandment keeping. It's not "just say no" to sin and knuckle under in dour discipline. Sanctification is fruit picking, taking up the fruit the Spirit has dropped into your life. Your life is hidden with Christ in God. You have been declared by God to be dead to Sin and alive to Him in Christ. You no longer live but Christ lives in you and the life you now live in the Flesh you live by faith in the Son of God who loves you and who gave Himself up for you.

What does that mean? It means you're dead to Sin, dead to your own adamic Flesh, dead to your Self. It means you're not a work in progress or on some kind of spiritual self-help program where God helps you work on your "sin issues." God has dealt with your sin-issues in the all-embracing death of His Son and has declared you as dead to Sin as Jesus on the cross is dead. Your Baptism is both your death certificate and your birth certificate, filled out in advance by the hand of God. All that remains for you is to catch up with your Baptism, to die and to rise in Jesus.

So what do you do when the Flesh does its works and you are tempted by Sin? You do nothing. That's right. That's what the dead do. Nothing. You don't give into Sin, that's giving life to the Flesh. You're dead. But you also don't fight it. That's like sparring with Jezebel. You can't win. Resistance is futile, and as the apostle Paul noted, the more you think about sin, the greater it becomes.

Just acknowledge it, take note of it, confess it, name it for what it is – lust, anger, pride, jealousy, envy, whatever it is. That's what confession is good for. You learn to name things for what they are. Don't try to battle Sin, don't argue with the Flesh. Just leave it alone, leave it be, be still. You're dead to it. It has no power over you. You are baptized into Christ. Stand at the mouth of the Baptism's cave, hidden in Christ, protected by Christ, robed in His righteousness. Keep your eyes glued on Jesus, as His were fixed on the cross, and don't let Sin and your Flesh distract you. Leave Jesus to deal with your anger, your lust, your jealousy, fits of rage, your sin-issues, whatever they may be. You just stay dead with Jesus on His cross.

Our problem is that we let Sin get into the middle of things, become the focus of our attention. That's idolatry. That's the devil's trick. He wants something other than Jesus in the middle. So he stirs up Sin, accuses you before the Law, and tells you now you need to get to work on that sin problem of yours. Discipline that Flesh. Put it on a spiritual fitness program. Feel the spiritual burn. And then you can take pride in your progress.

Here's the Spirit's way: Drop dead to Sin. Turn away away, distance yourself. That's not you. Take up that fruit the Spirit is producing in you. It's there always ripe and ready, like those plums on my front lawn. Pure gift. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. You have it. Enjoy it. Use it.

The problem with Elijah was he wasn't dead enough. He was still battling his enemies, those prophets of Baal and their queen, and he thought he was last man standing in the fight. The problem with the three potential disciples was they weren't dead enough. They were too busy being busy, saying their good-byes, fulfilling their obligations, volunteering for adventures with Jesus, having no idea where they were going.

Our problem is not that we aren't good enough or brave enough or pure and holy enough. We aren't dead enough – to our selves, our lives, to Sin and the old adamic Flesh of ours. What qualifies you for the kingdom is not your goodness but your deadness. Being dead to Sin and Self. And being alive to God in Christ. That's where your life is. Not in you but in Jesus who lives in you.

“Be still and know that I am God.” When the mountains shake and the waters roar and foam, as nations rage and kingdoms totter, as the Jezebels howl their threats, as war breaks out within the depths of your being, be still. Listen for that whispered Word in the stillness: “You are mine and I love you. I hold your life in my hands. I am with you always to forgive you, to free you, to raise you up. Take, eat and drink. Taste and see. Follow me.”

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

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#### SOURCE

*Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Galatians 5:16-26 (3 Pentecost 2019, Proper 8C)”, posted 2019-07-01 (<https://htlcms.org/2019/07/galatians-516-26-3-pentecost-2019-proper-8c/>).*