

## **Sermon for Zion – May 20, 2018 - Pentecost**

**Hymns:** 292 – Father, I Adore You; No, Not By Might;

390 – Spirit divine, attend our prayers; 399 – Spirit of Gentleness

**Scripture:** John 14:15-18; Galatians 5:13-26

**Sermon Title:** “Comforter, Helper, Counselor, Companion, Friend” – Rev. Rollwage

### **John 14:15-18 (NLT)**

*“If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn’t looking for him and doesn’t recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you.*”

### **Galatians 5:13-26 (NLT)**

*You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.*

*So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won’t be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.*

*When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.*

*But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!*

*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.*

*“I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate... I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway... I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. Oh, what a miserable person I am!”*

Those aren’t my words. Although they could be! Maybe they could be yours, too. After all, haven’t you ever had such thoughts? Have you ever found yourself just staring at the ceiling in the middle of a sleepless night, running the events of the day through your head, reflecting upon a particularly shameful moment, and thought, “Why did I do that? Why did I say that? What was I thinking?” Have you ever let yourself down, let others down, by failing on a commitment, a promise, a vow? Have you ever started off with the best intentions, and ended up with the worst results?

I have. And the writer of these words has too. His name was Paul. Or St. Paul, as we call him, Paul the Apostle, the giant of Christian faith and theology, the missionary who brought the church into the Western world, the man who articulated the impact of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ for all; it was none other than Paul who said these words; Paul, who was maybe more like us than we think. Listen again:

*“I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate... I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway... I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. Oh, what a miserable person I am!” (Romans 7:15-24)*

Paul, for all his faults – sure, he was arrogant, sure, he was pushy, sure, he was pigheaded and stubborn and opinionated and more – Paul, for all his faults, was honest. Painfully honest. Honest enough to make the kind of confession like that. And it isn’t the first time he makes it.

Writing the young churches he had established in the area of southern Turkey which the Romans called “Galatia,” Paul outlines the root of this struggle:

*“The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.”*

According to Paul – and experience, I think, shows that he’s right – according to Paul, we have two natures at war within ourselves. One, a selfish nature: the one that says, “Me, me, me.” The one we see in the youngest toddler who wants what the other kid has, just because the other kid has it; the one we see in the six-year-old, saying no, it was his sister who broke the lamp; the one we see in the teenager, making all their choices based upon what their parents would least want them to choose; the one we see in the young adults, testing the limits of their freedom now that they’re on their own; the one we see in the businessman willing to sacrifice family and ethics just to get ahead; the one we see in the woman who knows they shouldn’t tell that particular secret but it is too juicy not to; the one we see in the retiree hoarding their resources for “a rainy day,” while really just unwilling to relinquish control; there are countless ways the selfish nature manifests itself.

Then there’s the other nature. This one, unlike the first, comes to us from an external source; this one, says Paul, comes to us from God. This is the unselfish nature, the giving nature, the caring nature, the loving nature, the self-sacrificing nature. This, says Paul, is the sign of the activity of the Holy Spirit: And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires.

Previously, says Paul, the selfish nature always had the upper hand. We could struggle against it, but we could never win. But now, says Paul to the Galatians, to us, everything has changed. Now, says Paul, the power of selfishness, the power of sin, has been defeated, has been broken by the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there,”* he writes. Now, says Paul, we have the power of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, leading us, guiding us, setting us free from that old sinful nature. Now, says Paul, in the light of this new reality, *“Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.”* In order to do that, however, we need to understand just what, or who, the Holy Spirit is.

The Holy Spirit is the presence and power of God active within and through the people of God. When we feel the presence of God in our lives, it is the activity of the Holy Spirit that we are sensing. When we sense the guidance or direction of God in our lives, it is the working of the Holy Spirit within and through us. When we speak words of truth, hope or encouragement to another, words we ourselves cannot explain, it is the Holy Spirit speaking through us. When we experience peace or comfort in a moment of grief or anxiety, it is the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus also called “The Comforter,” ministering to us.

This is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promises to the disciples. “I’m going away,” he says, “But I will not leave you unsupported or friendless, as orphans alone in the world. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to help you and be with you forever” – an Advocate, says our translation; others translate the word as Comforter, Helper, Counselor, Companion, Friend. One like Jesus, but with us, within us, forever - the Holy Spirit; the presence and power of God active within and through the people of God. When we confess our belief in the Holy Spirit, we confess our belief that God continues to be present with, dwell within, and work through God’s people.

As Christians, we experience God through our very creation, our very life. We experience God through the person of Jesus Christ, who showed us what it was, what it is to be truly human, to live as we were created to live, and who along the way showed us what it was to think, to feel, to act, to love like God. And we experience God through the Holy Spirit, who draws us to God, who inspires us, encourages us, who works the slow and often painful transformation from within that we call becoming the Children of God.

And that slow and painful transformation is the very struggle which Paul spoke of earlier – the struggle between the old life and new, the old nature and our new life in the Spirit of God. We are used to “Me, me me;” we are wired that way. Selfishness is our basic operating system. If you look at all the misery which humanity has managed to bring upon itself, you’ll see that selfishness is at the core. But we’re not stuck there. There is a better way. There is another path. There is another guide, a light through the darkness of our unhappy and selfish world, our unhappy and selfish lives. Back to Paul:

*“So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won’t be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.”*

When confronted by temptation, we no longer have to succumb. We no longer have to be overwhelmed. Oscar Wilde, reflecting upon his own experience, declared that, “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.” But there is another way. We have a choice. We now not only have a choice, but the power to make that choice. We have the Holy Spirit within us, the very Presence of God standing with us, leading us, guiding us forward, into the path we should go.

Every time we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us, every time we say “no” to sin and “yes” to God, we put a nail in our sinful nature, and we set the Spirit free. Although the struggle continues, the battle will be - and the battle is - won, for we do not rely upon our own strength, but upon the power of God that is within us.

The power of sin was fully revealed in the crucifixion of Jesus, was laid bare for all the world to see, as the only completely unselfish man ever to live was brutally beaten and killed, crucified for insisting on living a life of forgiveness and love. And three days later the power of sin was finally broken, as the one whom sin had tried to defeat rose triumphant from the grave. *“Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?”* wrote Paul; *“Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

There is an old lie, a lie rooted deep within us, a lie which permeates us like poison in our bones. That lie is the voice of our sinful nature, a lie which claims, “My happiness, my security, my very survival, can be guaranteed only by acting selfishly, with only with my own interests at heart.” Yet Jesus, who does not lie; Jesus, who speaks only the truth, said, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”* (Matthew 16:24-26 NIV).

Jesus knew that only in following him – only in rejecting selfishness and embracing the path of grace, of mercy, of forgiveness and love – could life be truly found. For the culmination of a life of selfishness is death; the culmination of a life lived in the love of God, a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit, is *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”* (Galatians 5:22-23).

And couldn’t your life use a little more of that? Couldn’t your life use a lot more of that? Right now? It can be yours, in all its wonder, when you allow the Holy Spirit room to work in and through you. For when you allow the life of the Spirit within you priority in time and energy, then the Holy Spirit will become more and more a part of who you are, of why you are, of what you are.

All struggles are better faced with the help of another. Whether addiction or bad habits or resolutions, we do better when we join with another for help and support. Alcoholics Anonymous has as a cornerstone of their philosophy two main points: we rely upon the help of a Higher Power; and we can’t do it alone. We need a friend,

someone we can call, day or night, someone to make the journey with us, to stand with us, beside us, when things get tough.

That's the Holy Spirit. "Paraclete," is the word Jesus uses in our reading from John. We translate it, as we said earlier, as Advocate, Comforter, Helper, Counselor, Companion, Friend. The literal translation: "One called to our side." Through the Holy Spirit, God is with us. Beside us. One upon whom we call. Through the Holy Spirit, God is on our side.

When you face the struggle, remember you do not struggle alone. Pay attention to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. As Paul advises, *"Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves... And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires."* When you find yourself in the midst of struggle, pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you in the right path, and give you the strength and will to follow; pray that the Spirit will give you the desire to do what is pleasing to God, and best for you and the other around you.

It isn't easy. It's a struggle. Paul, of all people, knew that. He echoed the anguished confessions of our own heart. But he also knew this: *"Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives."* Amen.

### **A Prayer for Pentecost**

*Father, Jesus said you would never withhold the Gift of your Holy Spirit to any of your children who ask. And so we ask you now.*

*As your Holy Spirit filled to overflowing those gathered in that place of long ago, so fill your children gathered in this place today. We're tired of doubt. We're tired of failing. We're tired of uncertainty. We're finished with fear.*

*Bring to us a Spirit of love and encouragement, of unity and praise. Bring to us a Spirit of hope and joy, of peace and trust. Bring to us strength in the face of temptation, and clarity in choosing the right path. Fill our hearts to overflowing, we pray.*

*From this moment on, may we never be the same again; may we never look back.*

*Walk with us. Move among us. Come sweeping through us. Help each of us to live under the influence of your Holy Spirit.*

*We ask you, Father, in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit; Amen.*