

Fruit of the Loosed

Galatians 5:22-25

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 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.

I don't like to be lost. That feeling of panic that rises up inside when you realize you aren't where you thought you thought you were, that you aren't really traveling in the direction you believed you were.

The first really serious hike I ever did here in Oregon was the Timberline Trail- 41 miles around Mt. Hood. I'd hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail in New Jersey, I'd backpacked along the Picture Rocks shoreline in Michigan, and I'd spent time in Big Bend National Park outside of El Paso. None of these prepared me for the Timberline Trail.

For one thing I guess I thought going around the mountain wouldn't be quite as hard as going up it- except it turns out that pretty much what you're doing is going up and down and up and down all of the spurs that lead up to the mountain- and with all this climbing and descending the elevation change of the trail is over 9,000 feet. If you climb the mountain from the lodge you're just looking at about 4,000 feet. So after the first day I was popping what ol' Rob Ayers and I affectionately call Vitamin I, Ibruprofin, like it was popcorn. ☺

Worse than the elevation changes though are the stream crossings. What I didn't know about river crossings out here- nearly every time you get close to a river you

lose the trail. Every time you come to a river you can expect to lose the trail you're on. These rivers rise and fall so much the trail just gets eaten away anywhere near the drainage area. And, for at least 100 feet on either side of every river on Hood there will be absolutely no trail.

So, you're walking along good trail, clear trail- and then all of a sudden, it just gives out. And there's nothing to do, but just suck it up, and keep walking- not really knowing quite where you are, or where (or IF!) you'll pick up the trail again on the other side.

And for me, even if I know in my head that it's no big deal, that in just a few minutes I'll find the trail again- there is still a part of me, a very primal part of me that does not like this feeling, for even a few minutes, of not knowing quite where I am.

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The Galatian church knew what this was like- they knew what it felt like to be lost, too, and they didn't like it anymore than I do.

The Galatian churches were some of the first churches Paul started on the first of his three journeys.

And think about what that must have been like for a minute. To be one of the very first Christian churches in the history of the world. I mean right off the bat the church's favorite phrase, "We've always done it that way" has no referent- no meaning. How do we do worship? What do we do when a pastor leaves? Do we even need a

pastor? Nobody knows the answer to these questions. There's no church history. There's no handbook. No Book of Order.

Now on the one hand it's exhilarating, right? Everything is new. It's all a blank slate. And Paul tells them all they really need is faith in Christ- and everything else is up to them. For freedom they've been set free! And this is great- this is exciting. At first.

But, all this freedom- it's also incredibly terrifying at the same time. I mean really- how DO you do worship? How are you supposed to live? How do you know if you're headed in the right direction?

So, this adventure the Galatians are on is exciting, but it's frightening, too. Everything is new and there are NO maps. There is no trail. They've come to the river and the trail has been washed out on both sides and every now and again, in the middle of a hymn, or worse, in the middle of a sermon they feel in their gut the truth of their situation- in a fundamental way they are kind of lost. They have faith, but it doesn't tell them exactly what to do, or where to go, or even who they are totally.

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And we know the Galatians were anxious because of how they responded to these consultants that showed up soon after Paul left.

Now church consultants are like all consultants- some are really, really good; and some are slick as snakes and twice as mean.

When I first started ministry, I started out like Paul did, I started out as a church planter. My job was to develop a congregation in West Austin in a place called Lake Travis. My job title was actually an evangelist. Now, I am probably your exact image of an evangelist, right? I mean when you think evangelist- I mean my face just pops up, right? ☺ Yeah, believe it or not I didn't exactly grow up thinking that one day I would start a church or be an "evangelist". After last Sunday you probably realize that burning a church down was a far more likely possibility for me than starting one.

And so, given that I knew absolutely nothing about ministry and even less about starting churches, I talked to folks at Presbytery and asked them if they have any bright ideas. And they did! They found some church consultants for me to work with. And this sounded like a great idea to me...until I heard the name of what I would be attending: Church Multiplication Boot Camp. I mean church multiplication boot camp? What about that sounds like a good thing? First off- multiplication? Every week you see my facility with addition- and multiplication is harder than addition. So, already this isn't sounding so good. And the phrase 'boot camp' and 'church'- what's right about that?

But, I'm a good little Presbyterian, and so I did as I was told. I headed off to Colorado Springs to boot camp. And, to be fair, I did learn a lot. They knew a lot about the practical side, the organizational side of starting a new church- and this really was helpful. But less helpful to me- horrifying in fact, was some of the other advice they gave.

At one workshop designed to help us figure out how to go about finding people to fill up these now fantastically organized new churches of ours, we were handed out a

sheet telling us what made a good prospect. People who made the list? We were supposed to be on the lookout for people who were in hard life situations- especially people who were out of work. We were to look for people who had challenges in their family life- especially divorce. Oh they seemed very excited about divorce. And most of all, we were supposed to be on the lookout for anyone who was grieving. The consultant said and I quote, “People grieving a loved one are prime targets.”

And then after we found easy marks, the sheet gave us these little phrases that were supposed to give them the answers they were supposedly looking for. So, not only were we supposed to hunt people like wolves, going for the sick and the weak, we were supposed to offer easy answers, too. So, I raised my hand and said, “Yeah, but what if these answers, aren’t true?” And they just stared at me and then one guy said, “Oh, don’t worry about that. When their life is upside down- just want answers, it doesn’t matter if they’re true.”

I walked out.

Now there are great church consultants out there. There are. But these guys, these guys weren’t shepherds- they were after a body count. They were hired hands at best. And the consultants who visited the Galatians- they were like this, too.

See, they liked all the fear and the confusion they saw, they liked how lost the church was feeling. Because as long as the Galatians were feeling lost- these guys could give them answers, who cares whether they were true or not.

See, those consultants come in and told the Galatians Paul had gone too far- by throwing out the Jewish law, the rules, he threw out the baby with the bathwater. The consultants said that faith is fine, but it's not enough. Faith alone leaves us with too much freedom. They said we need a faith that can tell us what to do and where to go; we need a faith to answer every question and give us clear rules so we never have to think for ourselves again.

And the consultants had just the thing. They had the law- the Jewish law. It tells you what people you can be friends with and what people you can't. It tells you what to pray and when to pray. It even tells you what foods to eat and not eat. The consultants said just follow the rules and add Jesus on top- and then you'll never be lost; you'll never have to think again.

And, even if it was false- this sounded pretty good to the Galatians.

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Until they got Paul's letter, anyway.

“Who bewitched you?” Paul wants to know. He says they started out so strong, but now you've turned into a bunch of slaves- mindless slaves. Paul is so angry about this, so angry at these other teachers he say faith alone isn't enough, he says he wishes they would castrate themselves. Ouch!

But it's understandable. The reason he's so angry is this comes down to the very nature of faith itself- is our faith something that helps us face reality go forward even

when we're feeling lost, or is it going to be some crutch, giving us rules and answers whether they're true or not?

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Because the truth is life is a mystery. And every single one of us sitting here this morning- we're all a little bit lost. None of us knows exactly what is we're supposed to be doing. None of us knows exactly where we're going, or what our purpose is. This is just how real life is.

And to Paul, faith doesn't take this away- faith isn't about rules and certainties so we always know exactly what we're supposed to do in every situation. Faith helps us face this difficult freedom by giving us hints, markers along the trail when we lose our way. Faith gives us what he calls the fruits of the spirit.

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The fruits of the spirit- the words you see around the cross, these are the fruits of the spirit. Paul teaches us that when we're lost, we will know whether we're walking along good paths, true path, when, over time, we become like trees. We will know we're headed in the right direction when we branch out, leaf out, and, in season, bear fruit. Fruit like patience. Fruit like love. Fruit like self-control.

Now these fruits of the spirit aren't like rules or laws. They don't tell us what to do when we have a question. They're just markers, hints of what to look for when we're trying to figure out what path to take. And fruit- fruit takes time to grow. Sometimes it

can take us a long time walking in a particular direction before we'll even know whether we're bearing good fruit or not.

But we can trust these guides. Every week you can come and sit and look up at the cross and gaze up at these fruits of the spirit around the cross and you can ask yourself- is the path I'm walking on the right one? Am I bearing fruit? Am I as patient as I'd like? Am I as kind as I know I can be? And if not, why not? What can I change?

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When you do the Timberline Trail you always have a choice of what direction you want to travel. Most people start at Timberline lodge and they go in a clockwise direction- you go West and North. This is what Rob and I did. And it wasn't until the third day that I realized what a good thing this was.

See, the Western side of the mountain, the trail is fairly low- around 4,00 feet. You hike through beautiful old growth forest. You pass things like Ramona Falls. But, after you pass the North face and you come around Cooper's Spur- everything changes. The trail soars up 7,000 feet on Lamberton Butte. You're way above tree line. The wind tears at you. It's desert, it's moonscape. And sometimes for miles you just have little rocks, scree, under your feet with no trail at all. The only way you know where you're going is they have these giant stone formations with 2x4's sticking up out of them. And these are few and far between. And the only thing to do is to feel a little bit lost and to keep walking and to hope, now and again, that pretty soon you'll see one of these

markers that gives you a sense, if only for a moment, that you're headed in the right direction. Well, this- this is what our faith is like.

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We are all a little bit lost. None of us know exactly what we're doing or where we're supposed to going, or even who we are completely. None of us. May our faith be one that doesn't try to protect us from this freedom- but that encourages us to keep walking and offering up markers along the way. May our faith be one that leads us across trackless places- until we become like trees, leafing out, branching out, and bending over with good fruit. Amen. **Amen.**