

Midweek Advent Service #3

Jeremiah 3: 6-15

James 3: 1-12

Psalm 19

Hymn #352

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This may seem like an odd question: do you get tired of doing good? If the answer to this is yes, then you are probably pretty honest with yourself. If the answer to this is no, then I have a follow up question: why do you still do things that you know are wrong? We are still sinful beings, missing the mark of the target in many ways. So, we need the Torah, the teachings of Moses, to lead, guide, and direct us toward a more moral life. To the sinful flesh, doing good is tiresome. Such an attitude reflects a measure of internal conflict. Still, as newly created beings in Christ, we live by the Spirit, not according to the desires of the flesh. As those who live by the Spirit, we ought to exhibit the freedom of the fruit of the Spirit, which does good without the dictates of law. To live by the Spirit is a type of recreation of your very being. Christians are those who are what God has recreated us to be in Christ. To live in Christ means to live by the Spirit, and obedience to God becomes the result of a desire to do good for the sake of goodness, to do good for the sake of Christ.

You have been recreated to be faithful in Christ. Humanity broke faith with God, and it didn't seem to take very long after creation. A visually appealing morsel and a little external prompting was all it took for us to turn away from obedience to God. The bite of knowledge that was gained in that moment turned out to be more than man could chew, and man would soon be choking on overwhelming evil. Despite pain, suffering, misery, and despair, man's appetite for doing wrong outpaced the desire for goodness. "And the LORD saw that the evil of every human creature was great on the earth and that every scheme of his heart's devising was only perpetually evil. And the LORD regretted having made man on the earth and was grieved to the heart."<sup>1</sup>

At the time of Jeremiah, Israel broke faith with God. The prophet was blatant in his criticism, "Is there any place where you have not been ravished? By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness." An unrepentant Israel continued to plead for an end to God's wrath, but Jeremiah replied, "This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can."<sup>2</sup> There have been times when Christians have broken faith with God with utterly catastrophic results. The Roman crusades of the Middle Ages, the post-Reformation legacy of European anti-Semitism and the holocaust, the Protestant defenders of slavery and racial oppression in the United States, all carried out by many who professed to be Christians. Infidelity to God is an all too human betrayal.

The lesson to glean from this is that even the best teachers are unable to prevent perversion, corruption, and evil. The lower impulse of man is ready, willing, and creative enough to invent ways of doing evil, no matter how much effort is made to protect innocence. "The

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 6:5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 3:2-4.

fascination of wickedness obscures what is good, and roving desire perverts the innocent mind.”<sup>3</sup> Faithfulness must be about trust in God and obedience to what God calls good. Faith without obedience is a hypocritical sham. James tells us that we should not merely listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves. We should do what it says.<sup>4</sup> “Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us.”<sup>5</sup> Along with Israel, we must confess that “We have sinned against the LORD our God, both we and our fathers; from our youth till this day, we have not obeyed the LORD our God.”<sup>6</sup>

You have been recreated to be gentle in Christ. It is a real misperception that gentleness is weakness. Morrissey, some people may know that name, wrote “It’s so easy to laugh, it’s so easy to hate; it takes strength to be gentle and kind.” Gentleness used to be held as a mark of the virtuous man, a mark of the well-ordered soul. He would be called a gentleman. Our society is plagued by a type of macho-insecurity, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing. Christ demonstrates His strength in being gentle to broken, open to the outcast, and generous to the needy. All of us have been broken, outcast, and needy, and Christ has shown gentleness toward us.

A major point of failure for us in living out the gentleness of Christ is the way we speak. James says, “If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man...”<sup>7</sup> Failing to do this is weak, rash, and undisciplined. Scripture warns that “those who speak rashly will come to ruin,”<sup>8</sup> and “a hot-tempered man must pay the penalty.”<sup>9</sup> We often don’t take our words to be as harmful as they are. We speak harshly about our political leaders. Our spouses become the targets of our verbal arrows. An uncontrolled and unkind tongue corrupts the whole person. “It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”<sup>10</sup>

Gentleness begins with humility. The Son of Man entered our flesh declaring, “I am gentle and humble in heart...”<sup>11</sup> Rather than stirring up anger among others, we should seek to have “the gentle answer that turns away wrath.”<sup>12</sup> We are to consider others better than ourselves. So, stop taking yourself too seriously, and start taking others more seriously. Emptying Himself of all heavenly power and splendor, Christ came to the world as the ultimate act of gentleness. He could have come as the judge, demonstrating power through use of force, condemning the world, destroying it all. Instead, He came as a sheep to the slaughter, even as a helpless baby, who was judged as a sinner among sinners. He forgave those who persecuted Him, even those who called for and carried out His crucifixion. The recreation of humanity begins with humility and gentleness.

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<sup>3</sup> Wisdom of Solomon 4:13.

<sup>4</sup> James 1:22.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 3:25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> James 3:2.

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 13:3.

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 19:19.

<sup>10</sup> James 3:8.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 11:29.

<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 15:1.

You have been recreated to be self-controlled in Christ. The whole idea of self-control is odd. How am I not in control of myself? Isn't the concept of lack of self-control really just a way to shirk responsibility for our misdeeds? In reality, what is taking place internally is a battle between two selves. Recognition of our internal complexity is not new, nor is it unique to religion. Plato spoke of the mind, the passions, and the appetites. Freud could speak of the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Paul describes the dichotomy of the spirit and the flesh. If you live by the Spirit, you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the two are in conflict with each other. A rightly ordered soul experiences no such conflict because it is led by the Spirit.

We tend to think of freedom and control as being opposed to each other. This opposition is proven false when one considers what freedom looks like. An addicted person is the least free person there is. At a glance, it might look like they have liberty. Doing whatever one wants is a certain way to understand freedom. Such a person, however, is a slave to desire and a slave to sin. Discipline is freedom. Discipline, self-imposed discipline is what self-control and freedom really look like. Hebrews says, "Let us throw off the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."<sup>13</sup> An athlete might not have a life to envy. It could look like slavery to a routine, slavery to the team, and slavery to an idol. But it is only by the discipline to live in such a way that that athlete is free to pursue excellence.

Self-control, the Spirit led life, will be directed toward what is good and beautiful. Anything else risks returning to being enslaved to the desires of the flesh. A genuinely free will is one that finds such pleasure in the teachings of God that disobedience is as unappealing as slavery. With the Psalmist, we ought to proclaim, "I rejoice in following your statutes, as one rejoices in great riches... I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts."<sup>14</sup> If Christ came to set us free from slavery to sin, then He set us free for obedience, free for our neighbor, and free for new life in Him.

Maybe Adam grew tired of doing good and desired a misleading illusion of freedom in the taste of evil. That taste soon led to a race which found wickedness an appealing slavery and disgrace. In His mercy, Christ came to restore man to freedom, to give us new life, and the Spirit which lives as a new creation. The Holy Spirit brought about new life in the incarnation. That same Spirit brings about new life in you. Your new freedom did not come in athletic glory and your willed discipline. It came in anguish and grief, in blood and cross, in death and a tomb. The perfect self-control of Christ means freedom and life for you. No longer faithless, harsh, and enslaved, you are free to be like Christ – faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. You are free to bear the fruit of the Spirit. You are free to be what Christ is and what He recreated you to be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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<sup>13</sup> Hebrews 12:1.

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 119:14,45.