

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Galatians 5:16-24

*Live by the Spirit*

I don't know if you saw our garden at the picnic or not, but it was right behind me as I preached. It might not have looked like a garden, but it was our garden nonetheless. I suppose there's a reason I'm the pulpit and not on a John Deere.

It would have been nice if everything had come in well, for all of you to look past me and see what was clearly a garden. As it is, few would think that much work went into it, but that's just not true. I cut out the grass, dug out the rocks, turned the soil, put down the rock border, and even added some rich topsoil that a member gave us. Tricia and the kids planted the seeds. A lot of time went into the garden, but who'd know it when they see it. No, it looks neglected and half-hearted. It looks as if we planted one seed and gave up.

St. Paul had put a lot of work into the Galatians. He'd traveled a great distance to get to them, preached to them in the face of great danger, carefully taught them the word of truth, and helped settle their disputes and foster unity among them. Yet looking at them, they were starting to appear neglected and half-hearted. And are we that different? When people look at us, when we look at ourselves, is it obvious how much work has gone into us, or do we appear neglected and half-hearted.

Part of the reason the garden failed came from the outside. I'm pretty sure the rabbits had their fill. The rocks weren't enough to stop them and the chicken wire probably went up too late. Part of the danger to our fruitfulness has come from the outside as well. Temptations from the world have seized hold of us and, at times, gotten the better of us. We've not been sheltered from the temptations of a society that tells us not to fuss so much about boundaries that many claim disappeared long ago with regard to the God-pleasing view and use of sex, to our language and gestures, to the checking of sinful passions by sanctified reason, to modesty and moderation, and, even more, we've not been immune to these temptations. We've dipped our toes into the tepid waters of the world's empty promises, and on many a Sunday there's just as much muck from that putrid pond inside these walls as there is outside. Our defenses have been weak or come too late, and we've allowed ourselves to be taken captive by the very things from which Jesus came to save us. And it's plain to see. It's manifest and evident. There's little hiding it, especially from eyes above.

Part of the reason the garden failed came from the inside. Weeds sprung up from the same soil and choked what was planted. We tried to pull them, but didn't get them all, or got them after the damage was done. So also, part of the danger to our fruitfulness has come from the inside as well. That's why St. Paul calls the sinful nature the flesh. Our body is not sinful, but sin does cling to us like flesh. There's no escaping your sin, and there's no escaping the flesh. It is part of who we are this side of heaven, and it is not without effect. Where do jealousy and hatred come from if not from within, from our own self-rooted interests? How does greed see if not with our own eyes? Where does quarreling arise if not from our own tongues? Where does lust burn if not in our own hearts? All these things come, not from the world, but from our own flesh, and they choke the Spirit and mislead our feet.

Part of the reason the garden failed was what it didn't get. It needed more water and perhaps more sun. It needed to be fertilized. Part of the danger to our fruitfulness has also been what we didn't get. We haven't been watered and fed. We've strayed from the water of Baptism, taken the food of the Sacrament for granted, refused the Scriptures the time and thought they deserve. Outside of the light of the Son, we've chased the shadows, tempted to idolatry, the love of anything more than Him, to false teachings and dissensions, a reliance upon any word or thought more than God's own.

And so we sit here today, a garden of a few tomatoes and wasted soil. The devil's done his damage. He can't produce fruit, but he can strangle it. He can't feed soil, but he can starve it. He can't keep the sun from rising, but he can block its light. And so St. Paul says to us as well. *"I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."*

Those are frightening words, aren't they? *"Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God,"* because with a tremble and a blush we can't help but think, *"But I've done such things. What does that mean for me?"* I'll tell you what it means. It means that all those times we told ourselves it was no big deal, that God would understand, that it would be okay so long as we didn't get caught, we didn't know what we were talking about. Trees either grow or wither, bear fruit or go barren, and withering and going barren ends nowhere nice. *"Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."* St. Paul doesn't beat around the bush. If you've done those things, you're lost, bound for hell, charcoal in Satan's barbeque, wood on his bonfire. It's not okay, and it never will be okay, because every sin, even the seemingly smallest, even the most secret, is a trade, a Mickey Mantle for some AAA wash-up, heaven for hell. If St. Paul was a comedian then I'm a ballerina, and trust me when I tell you my toes don't twinkle. *"Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."*

A student once asked Luther, *"Why do we more readily believe Satan when he terrifies than Christ when he consoles?"* Luther answered, *"Because we are better equipped to doubt than to hope; because hope comes from the Spirit of God but despair comes from our own spirit."* And that is the problem, isn't it? We're born to doubt, to sin; it's what we do best.

On Labor Day we were driving back from my parents with the kids, which, as you might guess, is never an easy ride. The kids were fighting and hollering and in general trying to put me in the home before my time and so I finally said to Nicholas, *"Why are you acting like such a miserable little wretch?"* He answered in typical Nicholas fashion, *"Because you are a miserable little wretch."* Tricia tried to hide her laughter, and I'm sure she agreed with him. I didn't know whether to be proud or upset, but, to be honest, deep down I was proud. I had a little Lutheran back there. His answer was biblical as it was snide. It was true. He was such a miserable little wretch because I am such a miserable little wretch. *"Flesh gives birth to flesh."* A sinful nature, together with a last name, was my gift to him at birth.

*"O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner..."* It's not who we want to be, but it's who we are, and we can't will ourselves to recovery. There's no ten-step secret or magic pill. Flesh is flesh. Sinners sin. What you need is new birth.

*“But the fruit of the Spirit...”* Whose fruit? *“The fruit of the Spirit.”* The garden can’t grow itself, and the seed most definitely can’t plant itself in good soil. The gardener must do that.

Jesus told this parable:

*A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'*

Jesus is that gracious gardener. He never expected you to grow to full height overnight. He knows you must mature. He knows that true growth takes time. He knows that He must tend you even after He has planted His Spirit into your hearts. He wants to keep the birds from your branches and the weeds from your roots. He wants to water and feed you. He realizes that fruit must ripen before it is plucked. And none of this is an excuse to wither. No, it is all the more reason to grow.

Jeremiah gives you the words; the Samaritan leper gives you the example. *“Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.”* No one knows trees better than your Jesus. By a tree, He saw your parents overcome in the Garden of Eden. By a tree, we see Him overcome sin for us on the Calvary. On His head cursed thorns bloomed with blessing. And the wood of His tree turns the bitter and stagnant waters of guilt in the sweet and living waters of forgiveness. The Seed of Abraham plants the seeds of faith, with His Spirit, in that hole in your heart that this world can never fill. Grow toward that light of the Son. Walk in that light. You are at the same time sinner and saint, but that doesn’t mean saint has to surrender the capital “s.” The flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other, and they will wrestle all the days of your life until the dirt hits your coffin, but that doesn’t mean you should tap out. Besides, for the born-again by Baptism this things is a tag-team fight.

*“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”* And you belong to Him. You have been planted in His vineyard, the holy Christian Church. You have been watered with His living waters and fed with the fruit of His cross. You are the rebuilt, restored, and remodeled temples of the Holy Spirit. And where the Spirit dwells, there He bears fruit. What will that fruit look like? St. Paul tells us: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”* You are the Spirit’s orchard. Prepare to bear His fruit. And while you do, keep your fences high, watch out for weeds, and stay in the Son. Amen.