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The Life We Have Chosen

Galatians 5:25

We know from Paul's letter to the Galatians that he'd been a church builder for more than fourteen years. During that time he'd made several trips to the Roman province of Galatia and had started a string of Christian communities. But Paul couldn't be everywhere and his visits to that region became less and less frequent. Some hard liners began to promote their own interpretation of the Gospel which apparently leaned heavily toward the very Jewish traditions that Jesus ignored and dismissed.

Paul was driven by Christ's vision that God was not an impersonal force that made people behave in certain prescribed ways, burdened down by trying to follow a multitude of laws and rules, but a personal God who set us free to live freely but responsibly toward each other and all creation. And now there were people trying to drag the Galatians back to a rule-oriented system of faithful living that would essentially strip them of the freedom that was the central message of the Gospel.

In response, he writes this letter that was probably copied and read to all the churches in the province and once he describes the differences and uniqueness of the followers of Jesus he says *My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you...will so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence.* And then to offer encouragement Paul says this to them all: *Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.*

For the last few years that passage has been one of the "warm up" scriptures I read before I begin my daily devotional exercise routine. It's my way of reminding myself that when it comes to the living of my faith...the life I've chosen, it's not just about thinking or feeling, it's about incorporating it into every nook and cranny of my life. (At last report, I still have a long way to go!)

To be sure there are many people who have not chosen this kind of life at all. It's silly, irrational, superstitious or simply something that has never captured their interest. My latest forage into the world of reality television was a show about a comedian named Kathy Griffin called *My Life on the D-List*. Most of her act is about making fun of celebrities and her show is a tongue-in-cheek look at how in the world of celebrity she's not on the A or B or even C-List. In Hollywood she's a D-List star.

A scene from the only episode I saw had Ms. Griffin riding in a limo with her husband. She's talking to an entertainment columnist on the phone and is asked to comment on who she thinks is the most over-rated celebrity. Her husband chimes in and says, "Jesus Christ." Griffin agrees and launches into a diatribe about Jesus. "If anyone is a D-List star, it's him," she says.

The life of faith is an approach and perspective to living that many have not chosen at all. Yet I'm assuming that it is the life that most of us here today have either chosen or are at least considering. What I want to do is take Paul's words of encouragement for a spin this morning and break down what he is saying to the Galatians into three parts, for his words can still hold value to people in our time as well.

For instance, when it comes to the life we have chosen let's not just hold it as an idea in our heads for it seems that many can and do. Sounds a lot like Paul is talking about getting caught up in the theological dynamics and mechanics of faith. People like Thomas Aquinas, Paul Tillich, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth may write their multi volume thousands of pages theological examinations of the nature of God and the Trinity but after a while you tend to drift into what an anonymous 5th century English monk describes as the great cloud of unknowing.

Exploring the idea of God or theological inquiry is a good and necessary thing but it's not the end all and be all of faithful living. One of the theologians at C.T.S. told me that in his first teaching assignment at another school the expectation was that weekends were meant for study. Professors and assistant professors were expected to be in their offices at the school studying. But he had small children and caused a controversy when he announced that he would be spending those days elsewhere with his family. "Even theologians need to come down from the clouds," he said.

Henry Ward Beecher who at one time was a minister in Indianapolis during the late 1840s said of theology that it was the skeleton of the church and its faith, and like a skeleton should be kept largely out of sight. It's the flesh that injects the life. I'd tend to agree. But Paul is talking about the life of the spirit as an idea in our head as a good thing, but that at some point it needs to move beyond that. Eventually the thought needs to be transferred to paper...to a blueprint.

Several weeks ago while visiting New York City people were asking Mayor Ray Nagan of New Orleans why the Katrina recovery was going so slowly, his response was along the lines of, "It's five years after 9/11 and you guys can't fill up a hole." He was criticized to the point where he apologized, but his observation bears some truth. In 2002 a design competition was held for the structure that would replace the Twin Towers. There were advocates for each of the top five designs or ideas. When one was finally chosen there was much criticism from the victim's families to structural concerns from architects.

Ideas for new designs were submitted and the old design was reconfigured. The final product was criticized as well because of security issues and when more changes were made people said the base looked like a concrete bunker, so the design ideas kept coming four years after the event. Construction began in April of this year, even without a finished blueprint. There were still those ideas circulating in the architects' minds. The final version, or perhaps the latest version of what we now know as the Freedom Tower was unveiled this past June. It has taken some time to determine how to fill the hole.

Just goes to show how difficult it can be to get something from being an idea in our heads to blueprint. Paul must have been wise enough to understand that when it comes to the life of the spirit there is a time when we have to come down from the clouds. The life of the spirit is not "just" an idea.

2. When it comes to the life of the spirit let's not just hold it as a sentiment in our hearts. If Paul felt we could get hung up on the thinking and theology, he must have understood we could get sidetracked by feelings or sentiment.

For some, I think this can mean that it's nothing more than a sentiment. They are sidetracked by feeling and sentiment because when it comes to the life of the spirit the connection is held together by loose ties and circumstances. These are the people who say they believe in God but never give much time to pursuing the religious life at all. They are Christian because their parents were...or to make grandma happy...or profess the faith because everyone else has. They hold no ill feelings or high-spirited emotions about faith; it's more of a quiet sentimental attachment.

When asked why they are religious or Christian or Methodist some people who stand around the edges of faithful living will affectionately say, "because my father was and his father before him and his father before him."

On the other hand there are people for whom holding the life of the Spirit as a sentiment translates into a high charged emotional connection. Religious feeling runs deep. They make judgments about life and faith by how they feel rather than by what they think.

T.D. Jakes is the founder and pastor of Potter's House in Dallas. He's written a number of books including *Maximize the Moment*. He emphasizes that often some of the worst decisions we make are driven by what is emotional rather than rational. He uses the example of a frenzied dancing in the aisle church service, which is surprising since some of his services involve just that. Sometimes, he suggests people get so carried away by the emotion of the moment that they make commitments they never honor and decisions they later regret.

While both the thinking and the feeling are important pieces of the faith journey, Paul seems to be saying that there is something so much more: the life of the Spirit...let us work out its implications in every detail of our lives. Enter the hard part. Thinking and feeling may not require much energy or involvement, but this last charge requires a substantial investment. It means coming down from the clouds, it means stepping in from the edges, it means looking at all of life, not just the thinking and the feeling parts, but the doing parts as well.

That's why WHAM is so important (What's Happening At Meridian). My personal opinion is that in the long history of our church one of its proudest moments led to a hope for something that ironically didn't happen. In the 1960s during the height of the civil rights movement our congregation was well situated and comfortable. On several occasions the church had expressed an interest in trying to become more racially diverse. It was an idea held in the mind for some, a sentiment of the heart for others. Eventually we entered into conversation with an African American congregation on the north side about the possibility of merging. After a series of meetings both churches agreed to take it to their Boards for approval. The Meridian Street Board meeting was long and filled with energetic debate, yet when the vote was taken it was unanimously in favor of the merger. The African American congregation named University Methodist had a long debate-filled Board meeting as well and their vote was strongly against the merge. I've always felt that both churches made the right decision. University said no because they believed that Indianapolis was at a point when it needed--and Methodism needed--a strong black church in the city to set an example and serve as a role model for other churches. Meridian Street said yes because it was time to put the ideas to a blueprint and come in from the edges to get to the doing about an issue that was tearing our country apart.

What's happening at Meridian? With your involvement I think we will have more moments like that because Paul seems to be saying that the life of the Spirit is ever evolving with each generation working out its implication in every detail or issue of our lives and times.

And what that says of the church can also be said of us. When it comes to the life of the spirit for each of us individually perhaps the church and what is happening here will help you come down from the clouds, step in from the edges, and look at all of life, not just the thinking and the feeling parts, but the doing parts as well.

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