

The Way of the Spirit
Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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I was delighted to discover that today's Epistle reading is from Galatians 5. For me, and for many, this passage is a guideline for how to live a fulfilling life. Paul's words are an enormous gift to anyone who is willing to listen.

In Galatians 5, Paul is trying to persuade his readers to return to their previous way of following Christ. Apparently, they have fallen into bad habits and are arguing over theology. It appears that someone has tried to convince them that in order to be a true Christian, you must be circumcised. This was an argument in the early Church between those who believed only Jews could become Christians and those who argued that Gentiles were also welcome into the Christian faith. St. Paul was the great crusader for inclusivity. You'll remember that it is St Paul who said: "In Christ there is no Greek nor Jew ... all are one in Christ Jesus."

We hear a similar argument in Galatians 5. Just before our text, Paul is saying that it isn't necessary to be circumcised. He says: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love." Gal 5:6. What counts, for St. Paul, is living in the Spirit. Christ gave us freedom – freedom to understand and become thriving human beings; freedom to live life in fullness and grace; freedom to experience God's sustaining presence in all that we do and all that we are. The key for this freedom is following the Way of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. As people of faith, that's the spiritual map for our lives.

Sometimes it's easy to see God's gifts.

This time of year, we come face to face with the abundance of the gift of joy. Each day is a delight. The whole earth is bursting with glory, inviting us to be filled with joy. We have a tiny little bird, I think it's a wren, nesting in one of our begonia plants outside our kitchen window. She has burrowed down under the lower leaves of the plant so it's impossible to see her from the other side of the window, but every now and then she comes out and sits for a second on the edge of the pot. If she thinks her nest is in danger, because she's notice the shadow I create on the other side of the window, she'll fly to the top of one of the deck chairs and sing away. Yesterday she came and went from her nest a number of times, singing in between, as I watched with

delight in her mothering dance. Her presence is a gift of joy. When I notice that joy within me, I am noticing the presence of a gift of the Spirit.

Sometimes the gift of the Spirit is taught to us by people in unexpected places.

A few weeks ago, I came across a video clip of Lady Gaga speaking about kindness. I am not particularly up to date on famous people, but she's been in the news lately because of her recent movie "A Star is Born." In the video I saw, Lady Gaga was sitting at a piano on a stage in Canada at the beginning of June. Before she began to play, she spoke about the importance of inclusivity - all people matter. She is a great supporter of the LGBTQ community and her performance coincided with the beginning of LGBTQ Pride month. At the end of her short talk, she said: "One more thing: Be kind. Be kind." It was a moving moment. People have judged her harshly, yet she has become a voice for kindness and inclusivity. In a talk she gave with the Dalai Lama a few years ago on how hate and evil divide the human race, she noted that kindness would heal the world. It sounded a lot like St. Paul. Be about kindness and love, not about division and superiority.

Finally, sometimes the gift of the Spirit comes from an internal place - from the inner knowing of our hearts.

As some of you know, at the end of May I traveled to Ireland to lead a pilgrimage on Celtic Spirituality. One day we traveled from our retreat center to a tiny island off the Cliffs of Moher called Inis Oirr. We decided to visit the Island because it is the home of the ruins of a tiny chapel and cell that belonged to a 6th century monastic named St. Gobnait - a Saint known for her gift of healing and her gift of patience. It was a rainy and wet, but we made our way to the ruins and entered the roofless chapel, where I told the story of St. Gobnait's life.

When Gobnait was a fairly young girl, she realized she wanted to dedicate her life to God. She decided that her monastic home would be on Inis Oirr. She left her parent's home, traveled to Inis Oirr and settled into her monastic life. While she was there, however, she had a dream where God told her to travel to the place of nine white deer, who would be standing beside a river, and that would be the place to build her monastic community. After receiving the dream, St. Gobnait left Inis Oirr and began walking throughout Ireland seeking the place of the nine white deer by a river. At one point, she came to a river and there were three white deer so she gave thanks but she knew it wasn't her resting place. She traveled on and eventually came to a river and there were six white deer. She gave thanks, but she knew that no matter how weary she felt, this was not the place where she would rest. She set out on her journey again, walking days and days until the day she came to a river and nine white deer. She gave thanks for arriving and finding the land where she would build her community of faith.

Through her faithful, patient journey, she became more aware of God's guidance in her life. Story tells us that her monastery flourished, and she became a great healer and spiritual leader.

As the story came to an end, people started to leave the tiny chapel to explore St. Gobnait's cell and well. Soon I stood there by myself. I did not want to leave because I felt a strong sense of Holy Presence. It was as though St. Gobnait's story was being whispered into my own heart - it was as though God was saying: "walk through your days with patience and an open heart and I will be with you."

This is our invitation from scripture today. We are invited to open our hearts to the gifts of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. It is in these gifts that we encounter the presence of God with us.

May God be with you on your journey. Amen.

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