

Cover Verse: My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. Gal. 5:16 (The Message)

Trinity United Methodist Church, Iron Mountain, Michigan
Pastor Geri Hamlen

World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2018 10:30 a.m.

We are wrapping up our series on Imagining the People of God. Another one of those subjects that I could probably preach on for a year and still not cover all the possibilities but let's just do one more exercise in imagination. Because we know that God gave us active and creative minds so that we can indeed think like Jesus. And one of the ways to do that is to imagine the disciples of Jesus who left us these wonderful letters that we have in the Bible.

For example, can you imagine Peter's voice like that of a favorite uncle. An easy to get along with, down to earth kind of guy. Kind of impulsive, trying the walking on water thing with Jesus. Jumping into the middle of the lake to get to the shore and see Jesus. We know a lot about Peter:

*Fisherman

*Survived arguments with Jesus—Get behind me

*Betrayed Jesus—3 times but forgiven by Jesus in the post-Resurrection time.

And from there, as you read the Book of Acts and the letters of Peter...he comes across to us down through the centuries as a kind man with practical words of wisdom and he never ever forgets that Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves...because Jesus went through everything we are going through...and more. So we trust Peter...We can believe what he says when he talks to us down through the ages. Like a favorite uncle...we may not totally understand but Peter has a credibility...and a practical way of explaining things. He just might be the kind to ask you to go out fishing and then talk to you about Jesus...like in his first letter...

Reading from the Letters 1 Peter 4: 1 - 2 (The Message)

*Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more,
learn to think like him.*

*Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit
of always expecting to get your own way.*

*Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants
instead of being tyrannized by what you want.*

We have good-time, easy going Uncle Peter and then, along come Uncle Paul. The Apostle Paul, who, unlike our favorite Uncle Peter, we can imagine as being a more formal, even kind of a scary uncle.

*Well educated. *Upper class family *Roman citizen

He's got status and clout and he is absolutely convinced that he is right...

Before he ever met Jesus, Paul was so convinced that the followers of Jesus were wrong that he captured, arrested them. Turned them over to the religious authorities. For earthly judgment

and prison time and penalties that included whippings. I was reminded a while ago while reading through the Bible in a Year that Paul (formerly known as Saul) approved of the stoning to death of Stephen.

Definitely a Scary guy.

But that's not the whole story because Jesus has a way about him. And once Paul was touched by the light of the Lord, blinded and confirmed that Jesus is indeed his Savior as well as ours, Savior of the whole world...Paul became just as convinced that Jesus was right. And Paul was just as passionate about that and fortunately, a whole lot more merciful. Funny kind of turn around because in fact, Uncle Paul is the one who wound up in prison and being whipped and judged for believing in Jesus. Let's listen to what our stern and single-minded kind of an uncle Paul has to say, with a different voice from that of Uncle Peter.

Reading from the Letters Gal. 5:16 – 17, 22-23

P. G. My counsel is this:

Scott: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit.

Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness.

P. G. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit,

Scott: just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness.

P. G. These two ways of life are antithetical,

Scott: so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way

according to how you feel on any given day.

P. G. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit

and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

Scott: But what happens when we live God's way?

P. G. God brings gifts into our lives,
much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—

Scott: things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity.

P. G. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart,

Scott: and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.

P. G. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments,

Scott: not needing to force our way in life,

P. G. able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Scott: The words of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God

Uncle Pete and Uncle Paul. Different voices. You might even say...very different voices. But, if you listen closely, to what was just read...you will hear that Uncle Paul and Uncle Peter are really telling the same story. Giving us the same message. Did you hear it: Don't force your way in life.

Don't live in tyranny to your wants and needs.

Quit expecting to get your own way.

Don't feed the compulsions of selfishness.

Quit being so self-centered. Because God has so much better in store for you!

Think with the mind of Jesus. Uncle Peter and Uncle Paul have Different voices. But they are giving us the same lesson and telling us the same story—give up on yourself and give your life to God. Because that's how and where God brings gifts into our lives,
things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity.

You know, sometimes I think there is really only one story that the Bible tells over and over again. I could be wrong on this but it's something I've been thinking about...One story...what our two uncles are talking about: The story of human selfishness...transformed...for God's purpose.

The story of human selfishness is as old as time.
Adam & Eve Selfish for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve might say...I wasn't selfish. I shared with Adam...but isn't it even a little selfish when we want what we want for the people we love?

Cain & Abel Cain wanted to be God's favorite. He was jealous of the attention God gave to Abel and selfish enough to kill his brother to wipe out the competition.

Joseph's big brothers that Joseph was selfish for getting the coat of many colors from their Dad but it was really each of them wanting and needing to be the chosen son who received the best of Jacob's love. Selfish...and they sold him down the river.

Women don't get off free...Moses' sister, Miriam, wanted more power, more authority. She wanted her way and complained that Moses was in charge. Living in tyranny to her own wants and needs... self-centered.

In the New Testament we read stories of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector...selfish, dishonest, greedy.

Of rich men who ignore the beggars lying at their front door...self-centered.

Of religious people who pray loudly and visibly—needing recognition--while the humble ones stand with their heads bowed. Self-glorifying.

This story of human selfishness, told over and over again in the Bible with different characters and different voices...can end one of two ways.

Selfishness wins. One person gets what they want at the expense of others who pay with their lives, with their self-esteem, with their position in society.

Or God wins and the story goes like this: Human selfishness....transformed...for God's purposes.

Peter, our favorite uncle Peter, is telling us to imagine letting go of what we want...imagine being set free from the internal demands that we make on ourselves and other people and society. Imagine living our lives with the freedom to pursue what God wants, unencumbered by our personal preference, and individual opinions on what's best.

Paul, our scarier, more formal uncle is telling the same story in a different voice, saying:

P. G. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit,
Scott: just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness.

P. G. These two ways of life are antithetical,
Scott: so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way
according to how you feel on any given day.

P. G. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit
and so escape the erratic compulsions.

.....
Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit.

Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness.

Our uncles, telling us: the gift is ours for the taking: Human selfishness...transformed...for God's purposes. The same lesson, the same story, told over and over again with different voices.

As Uncle Peter says: Learn to think like Jesus. Since he's been here and done this human life on earth thing...he knows what and how we are. So now it's our turn to use our imagination to think like Jesus.

And isn't that what the Bible stories tell us? The stories of Jesus? Over and over again, we hear the stories of human selfishness...transformed...for God's purposes.

Zacchaeus...Jesus came to dinner and Z—transformed... decided to give half his possessions to the poor and he went so far away from selfishness...paying back 4 times as much as what he defrauded.

Do you remember the story of The men who selfishly wanted to stone the woman accused of adultery...Jesus reminded them of their own sinfulness...transformed, humbled, they were able to walk away...

There's the woman at the well, with five husbands...talked to Jesus and came to know herself loved by God...transformed...and went on to share the good news with her neighbors.

And what about at the cross...the ultimate selfishness of those who didn't have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. And they forced their way in life by setting Jesus up for death on the cross. Horrifying. Devastating death of the one who came to save us. Human selfishness...and 3 days later...the death of Jesus transformed for God's purpose into the Easter resurrection that stands at the heart of our faith.

We know that human selfishness is a reality. We are not naïve.

What sets us apart from the rest of the cynical, depressed and despairing world is that we also know that the whole story...the rest of the story...God's story, told in many different voices but steadfast all the same: Human selfishness...transformed...through Jesus Christ...for God's purposes.

These may be dark days for many of us for a thousand different reasons. In our personal lives. In our work places. In the public arena as citizens of this country. Even here in our church where there is uncertainty at a local as well as an international level. But in spite of all of

that...we have the gift of these many, many different voices telling us the same story over and over again.

Yes, even our Trinity UMC is part of that story...during this Jubilee Year...we are living and loving and praying our way into the reality that God has a purpose for us. We may not know what it is yet. But we are open and waiting and looking for how our human preferences and desires and ideas and selfishness can be changed/transformed by the power of Jesus...for God's purposes. Imagine what that can look like!

And any story you hear from anyone, anywhere...that does NOT include the power of God to transform our selfishness...is incomplete. *I think that's why I flinch a little bit whenever someone says to me...well we don't have very many children and our numbers are shrinking but aren't all the churches have the same problem?* Yes, human selfishness at all kinds of levels is changing the landscape in lots of churches but where's the next part of the story? The part that says...God has a purpose for God's churches and we can't just sit by and wait for an inevitable decline when Jesus has the power to transform even us, for God's purposes when we stop and listen and pray.

Truly...any story you tell yourself or that someone tells you that does NOT finish with affirmation of God's loving intention for us, for this church and for his world, is a story that has one more chapter. And you just may have to be the person to fill in the blank and say...Yes, but don't forget that God loves us. That Jesus has the power. That the Holy Spirit is here among us...working for good.

The world needs to hear that sometimes. And there are people in your life who need to hear it from each of you. Just like we have heard it this morning from Uncle Peter and Uncle Paul. Because that's what the People of God do. We tell the stories of Jesus to those who don't yet know them. To those who used to know them but have forgotten them. Yes, we even tell them to people who have no desire to even believe them. Imagine the people of God...all of our different voices, telling that one simple and amazing story...Human selfishness...transformed...by God's love through Jesus...for God's purposes. That would be truly amazing! Thank you Jesus...for showing us the way. Amen.