

Today's passage is one of the most formative texts for my life of faith and our collective shape as a faith family. It is a passage that helps me find footing amid the array of spiritual and biblical agendas crashing into my soul and crossing my line of sight. It is a text that helps me find clarity in endless opportunities and overwhelming need. This passage gives us both an image to ground our expectations and responsibilities to provide boundaries for our actions.

The free life is not unlimited. We are uninhibited in our access to life eternal, but not "free" to do whatever we see fit, to live by our wits and wisdom. There is, as we have said over and over again, a way of living free that is a yielding to the "easy yoke" designed for us by Jesus, gifted to us in the shared life of the Spirit to allow our living and working, sleeping and eating, loving and mourning, experiencing and waiting amid a world in rebellion to be "light." But, it is "a way," or better yet, "the way," which implies that we can choose some other way. And, as we have said over and over again in this series, any other way is submission not to life in its fullest, but slavery, imprisonment, a reduction and eventual destruction of life.

Here today, as Paul wraps up his appeal to his friends and faith family to choose the free life through Jesus crucified and alive, we find Paul giving those whom he shared life with the very simple, yet broadly applicable image and limitation of the free life of faith. If they, and we, let this image and these bounded responsibilities in relationship sink through our hearts' and minds' and into our hands, out of our mouths, and onto our shoulders; we will be sure to finish with Him who started it all: free and light forever.

Okay, so here is the image: a grapevine. This image of a grapevine is in contrast to the image Paul gave us for a life lived by our wits and wisdom, "the works of the flesh" (5:19). "Works" is an image of a person laboring his or her best efforts, with the best intentions, only to find that they lacked the wisdom, skill, and foresight to produce without unintended consequences—to make good without also making bad. There is scrap, leftover, left out, and twisted product, no matter how "admirable" the work itself might be. But the "fruit of the Spirit" (5:21) is an altogether different image. The fruit is not your fruit, not the product of your life, but the product of your inclusion in the life of the Spirit.

Paul is not saying something new, he is quoting Jesus, who spoke to those following him, in the same conversation in which he promised the Spirit's arrival to help them, counsel them, and convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 14:15-26, 16:4-15);

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn. 15:4-5)

Disconnected from a relationship with Jesus, off on our own, we can do nothing. But when we choose to take up residence in the one who takes up residence with us (remember Jesus is called, "Immanuel, God with us")—trusting that God is here, sharing his life with us (walking with the Spirit, being led by the Spirit as Paul

said last week (5:16,18)) then a life of abundance, a free and light life, is the unavoidable produce. Such character that the fruit of the Spirit describes is a result of the promise, not of labor. Here is how one pastor translates Paul's image for us,

“What happens when we live God's way? Quite without any effort on our part things begin to appear in our lives much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard, things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of going with the grain of the universe [in-step with God's design], a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people; and we find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely...These qualities of life develop as surely as fruit on a well-cultivated tree [or vine].” (5:21-23, MSG)

Such a life, Paul says, is not subjected to laws, regulations, or what-ifs. There is no wondering what is allowed or not, no one forcing such actions, and no one prohibiting such actions. “No one can make us do these things; at the same time, no one can prevent us from being such persons,” either. For all us “spiritual” and “religious” who walk on eggshells through life wondering if we are doing the right thing and for all us “spiritual” and “religious” who think we have life figured out in the details of the do's and don'ts of religion: Christ Jesus puts to death our fears and pride so that we can live free in-step with the Spirit, simply by abiding, remaining relationally connected to his love, his word, and his friends (Jn. 15:6-17). “Among those who belong to Christ Jesus, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good.” The certainty we long for is found in the promised fruit of relationship, not labor.

So, the image that grounds our life of faith, the life of freedom, is the image of a grapevine. A branch that is full of fruit simply because it is connected to the vine through which life flows—doing exactly and only what a branch can do when it is healthy, not trying to be something more than a branch, or a branch on its own.

If you or I try and live a life of faith and freedom through any other image, we will, even if inadvertently, fall back into imprisonment. But fear not, having been animated, given life, by the Spirit (5:25), we walk (go about our daily living) by the Spirit, and so find the boundaries of our responsibility in this abiding life.

Jesus concludes his vine and branch imagery for the free life with these words,

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn. 15:9-12)

In the life of faith, my responsibility is to be me, and only me, with you and for you. The free life of faith is matured and maintained through choosing not to compare and contrast myself with you or anyone else. I am free when I do not judge others through myself as the standard or self-made standards; for in so doing I cultivate not freedom but self-defensiveness and self-condemnation—in me or in another.

Paul's statement in 5:26, "Let us not become conceited [i.e. confident in our perceptions of life without warrant], provoking one another, envying one another," can be phrased,

"[Since we are animated and motivated by God's Spirit] That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original." (5:26, MSG)

As long as I refuse to take up the unique yoke given to me, as only for me, I will be bound by others—whether self-bound in my comparing and envy, or oppressed by another's expectations for me. But, when I recognize that Jesus freed me to be me for and with you, then I can act with confidence and humility in those everyday roles and relationships of which we are so fond of mentioning!

In the free life of faith I take responsibility for myself and for you, but not from you. Here is how Paul describes it in 6:1-5,

Brothers and sisters, anyone is ensnared, overtaken in any transgression, finding themselves out-of-step with the free life in Jesus like Peter was in chapter 2 of this letter, forgetting that he (Peter) was led by the Spirit into seeing a life without the division of the Judaizers, but because of their appeal and his own desire to be liked, was out-of-step with the gospel, reducing his life and the lives of others—when you see a sister or brother living entrapped, you who are "spiritual" [you who are walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit not acting on your own wits or wisdom], should restore [help bring back-in-to-step with the free life] him or her with a spirit of gentleness [as a product of the Spirit leading you]. And as you do this, keep watch on yourself, lest you be tempted to take more responsibility than is yours. Your responsibility, bear one another's burdens. Help shoulder the difficulties of living free in following the Spirit with others, and so fulfill the commandment of Jesus Christ to love one another as he has loved us. **If you think you are too good for that, for following the Spirit in shouldering your friends load, that what you desire, are passionate about, are convicted of or what you are fearful of or uncomfortable with is more important than your sister or brother's free life in the Spirit and a Spirit dependent relationship with them; then your still missing it!**

But here is the thing, you can shoulder the responsibility with your faith family, but you cannot take responsibility from one another. Let each one of you test his or her own work, and then her or his reason to boast will be in herself or himself alone and not his or her neighbors. In other words, make a careful exploration of who you are and the work God has given you through relationship with Him, and then sink yourself into that. Don't live vicariously. For each of will have to bear his or her own load, taking responsibility for doing the creative best we can with our own lives.

Because we have been uniquely gifted with life by the Spirit, we can walk by the Spirit and be led by the Spirit into a fruitful life; taking responsibility for ourselves and one another but not from one another. This is what it looks like to live free and light, as we remember that it is the life of faith produces not from labor but relationship.

With an image to ground our expectations and responsibilities to provide boundaries for our actions, we can encourage, equip, and journey side-by-side with one another into a life of freedom in Jesus.

So, how do you imagine achieving the free and mature life? How do you imagine becoming the person God has created you to be? Is abiding in the love and word of Jesus as you love one another too simple for you? Why?

Are you taking responsibility for yourself, but not for one another? Are you taking too much responsibility for one another, taking responsibility away from your friend, GC member, sister, brother?

What would life look like if you lived believing that abiding was enough? What would life look like if you took appropriate responsibility for yourself and for those you share life?

As we let this image and these bounded responsibilities in relationship sink through our hearts' and minds' and into our hands, out of our mouths, and onto our shoulders, we will be sure to finish with Him who started it all and is faithful to complete us.

Let's pray.