10C 2025

Did you notice that Paul is more pleased with the Colossians than he was with the Galatians last week.

I mean, he is not as pleased with them as he is with the Thessalonians, but the Galatians are doing pretty well.

Much better than the Romans in the arrogant capital city who got 16 chapters and the Corinthians in the rough and tumble port city who got two letters totaling 29 chapters.

His letter to the Colossians, on the other hand, is only 5 chapters long.

(The letters were not really written in chapters, but you get my point.)

He writes to them, "Just as [the gospel] is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. . . . Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant . . . has made known to us your love in the Spirit."

Paul is happy.

What does Paul list as signs that the gospel is bearing fruit in Galatia?

They are embracing the grace of God and developing love in the Spirit.

These are the hallmarks of when the gospel is truly adopted and bearing fruit.

There is no hint here of the rigid legalism of so many people who practice religion, or should we say, hide in religion.

He does not congratulate them for choosing the right group to hate.

They are embracing the grace of God and developing love in the Spirit.

In a similar vein, when the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit unending life, Jesus turns the question back to him.

"What is in the law, lawyer? What do you read there?"

The lawyer answers: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

The lawyer answers well, but is not content.

He wants to justify his having asked the question.

Otherwise, he will look stupid.

"Yeah, I already know that, Jesus, but who is my neighbor?"

Jesus does not define a specific group as our neighbors—all Jews, people from your hometown, family and friends.

No, that would limit the number of people he could call his neighbor.

Jesus tells him that his neighbor is the person he treats with dignity and respect.

The burden is on us to be a neighbor to everyone who will receive it.

As I told you last week, the New Testament is very clear in its message, but we are very clever in twisting it to our own devices.

If something does not start with grace and is not grounded in love, it strays from the gospel.

Sadly, people who call themselves Christians have justified and made themselves very comfortable with greed, oppression, war, intimidation, cruelty.

Christians have held slaves.

Christians have lobbied for cruel policies and approaches when other policies and approaches were possible.

These actions are generally engendered in fear, which the gospel teaches us is the opposite of faith.

A fearful Christian is like an acrophobic high diver.

The jittery high diver will demonstrate little to justify calling herself a diver.

Standing at the top of the precipice quaking in fear does not make one a high diver.

Rooting for the 49ers does not make us an athlete, either.

The point is, a Christian who is fearful bears little fruit.

Such a person might mine the Bible to find some justification, some quote when taken out of context that validates a fearful approach, that blesses greed, oppression, war, intimidation, and cruelty in the name of God, but when we look at the overall context, the gospel is clear: If something does not start with grace and is not grounded in love, it strays from the gospel.

I hope you hold your head high in the world as we stand together for honesty, integrity, peace, respect, compassion, generosity, and general well being.

I hope you are joyful to be members of a community that rejects fear and shame, that practices the radical welcome of Jesus, and that celebrates humility, grace, forgiveness, and trust, a community that lets God in to do God's work of healing.

I have told you before, I see people blooming here, each at his or her own pace and according to his or her own gifts.

There is no rush.

It is all in God's time, and it is beautiful.

When John asks whether Jesus is the messiah, Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

I would say, "Come and see, the spiritually enslaved are freed, those with blinders remove them, the lonely are befriended, the poor in spirit have good news brought to them."

When people ask you what Episcopalians believe, you can tell them that we believe that all things worth doing are grounded in grace and love, forgiveness and humility.

Tell them to come and see.

Hearts are made whole.

Friendships are built.

Fears are faced and banished.

Community is nourished.

People thrive.

If they persist in their questions to make sure that we have the right theology before they step foot in the door, you can tell them that we do not believe that God can be put in a box because that is really an attempt to predict and to control God.

The Love that is the source of all existence cannot be organized according to some code or theorem or dogma.

You can tell them that we are in relationship with God.

We seek to put aside our fear and shame that leads to the need for control so that we can humbly allow God to work in and through us.

Who knows where that will lead?

Only God.

We are content to practice grace and love and humbly let God lead.

But what about the 39 articles and the 27 spiritual gifts and the 7 covenants?

God is so much greater than any of these lists.

Where lists do exist, it is much like the law, which is for those who are as yet too frightened to love, too frightened to grasp the truth, so laws and lists had to be made to point towards letting go of fear and shame.

Hold your head high, delight in humility, and let your light shine.

We do not have to be perfect to love.

We just have to face our fears, and that is often best done with the support of others.