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“Freedom that Bears Fruit”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Last year the Diehl household did significant planting and landscaping in our yard. I mentioned this on my Facebook page that spring, and a gardening expert friend responded. She wrote: “Remember to water your newly planted shrubs often.”

I knew the shrubs would need to be tended carefully for a while, but I was grateful for her reminder. No matter how much rain comes, it doesn’t take long for things to dry out in late spring and early summer. Turned out I was in the yard with the hose more than I anticipated.

Do you know that a garden hose has a mind of its own? Hoses don’t curl up the way you want them to. They won’t lay flat; they bunch up and get caught in a knot when you try to pull them. And when you least expect it, this unruly beast jumps on the carefully tended flowers you have been nurturing for the last 6 weeks and mows them down. On those beautiful early mornings when it is just nature and me out there in the garden, I can almost lose my religion because of the watering hose.

Several years back, I was taken in by a promise I saw on a sign at Home Depot. It was like a revelation from heaven to me. The sign said, “No kink hose.”

I bought it.

I expected life to change forever: the time in the garden would be simpler and oh, so sweet. I detached the wretched and ratty old watering hose and gladly threw the

knotted mess into the trash. I anxiously attached the new, sleek version to the spigot and held my breath.

Do you know that I have the capacity to kink a no-kink hose? Garden hoses have a mind of their own. They don't do what you want them to do.

In those early morning forays into the yard, when my frustration was not getting the better of me, I began to pay attention to the hose. I noticed that each hose had a particular predisposition. They would wind and unwind in a unique way. I guessed that it was the way they were made and how they were packaged before they reached my back yard.

And I began to learn that if I handled the hoses a certain way, if I took into account their predisposition and the way they would naturally unwind and wind back up, that my experience with them would be far less frustrating. Instead of tugging the hose and cursing it into submission only to have it act out on one of my flowering plants while my back was turned, instead of piling the hose up in a jumbled mess, if I took time and was patient to learn its own uniqueness, we got along just fine.

Sometimes I think I've tamed the hose. The truth is much more personal. Instead of controlling the hose, I've learned to control me. At least some of the time.

This is a lesson not merely to learn with inanimate objects. Far too long in my parenting, I believed it was my purpose to gain compliance from my children. I should utter the instruction and they should obey.

Far too late in my life and theirs, I began to learn that my role was not to exercise control and gain compliance. It was to consistently and patiently provide direction in the context of love. It was to understand them, taking into account their own unique predispositions. Controlling them was not in the cards. The only one I could control was myself. Occasionally today I remember that.

In our Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus and his disciples were making their way to Jerusalem. They had to pass through Samaria to get there. As you know, the

Samaritans and the Jews did not get along. Most Jews considered themselves better than Samaritans, and that kind of superiority doesn't engender good relationships.

A particular village in Samaria did not receive Jesus. James and John, known as the "sons of Thunder" I'm sure because of their volatile natures, ask Jesus, "Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" I understand their request because of my experience with hoses and children. The disciples' request was in line with the action of the prophet Elijah when he called down fire to destroy a wayward people.

Jesus wasn't interested. He straightened his disciples out with a word and then went on. It wasn't the Samaritans who needed to change; it was the disciples. And in the places ahead when Jesus encountered those who might follow him, the issue before Jesus was never gaining compliance from those folks but challenging them to see what was inside themselves.

And each person was unique with his or her own predispositions.

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

"Let the dead bury the dead; you proclaim God's kingdom."

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

No fire or brimstone was necessary. Freedom in the context of love was offered. And people could make a choice; one could make one's own decision.

Paul's letter to the Galatians strikes a similar theme. It is all about freedom rather than compliance; it is about self awareness rather than manipulating the forces around them.

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Freedom is not for self-indulgence but for serving others. That was the core of Jesus' teaching and his actions. Paul picks that up and reinforces it.

The greatest challenge to us of moving into such a role of love and service to others is our need to control. We want the best for them and we think we know what the best for them is. And often our primary efforts are directed toward getting others to comply with our views or demands or opinions.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and typically we have the darnedest time loving ourselves because we just aren't what we think we should be.

The Apostle Paul provides a laundry list of things that are opposed to freedom as granted by the Spirit through Jesus Christ. If you take a close look at this list, every one of these no-no's is an effort by human beings to exercise or gain control: control over someone else, control over the opposition, control over God, control over the outcome of situations, control over ourselves and our impulses.

The fruit of the Spirit is so different. It has nothing to do with the control of others or the outcomes we want. It has everything to do with us, with who *we* are, with what *we can be*.

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Whether it is our political wrangling or competition in the work place or raising our children, or maybe just managing the garden hose, we want to win, we want outcomes that we believe are best, we want to guarantee what happens.

The fruit of the Spirit is something that happens to us, not to others.

Presbyterians are not known for asking the question, “What is God doing in your life?” It makes us uncomfortable, and we may try to grasp easy answers. The reality is often that God's work in and through us is much gentler, longer term, like the bearing of fruit.

The work of a gracious God is to make us gracious. The work of a patient God is to make us patient. The work of a kind God is to make us kind. The work of a forgiving God is to make us forgiving. The work of a loving God is to make us loving.

If that is not happening within us, then what are we trying to control?

I never knew I could learn so much from a garden hose, and from the raising of children.

But the truth is the issues we confront are always within ourselves. And as we learn to love, maybe we can learn to love ourselves, to love others, and grow in that fruit of the Spirit.