

The author of Galatians might have been looking over our shoulders these last tumultuous years.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; ***only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence***, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

Freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence has become an international bad habit...

We have heard a lot of concern over the ‘new level of public conversation’ - we have been dismayed by wildly divisive reactions to public health policies - we have watched with concern as political strategies become focused on division rather than unity. We want to blame someone for this - because it's unsettling - so politicians and public figures draw our wrath and our disdain. But Galatians suggests that we might need to look in the mirror.

The state of public debate; the directions taken by political parties; these are new symptoms of the old human disease - one the bible calls sin. And while we are currently seeing an ugly wave of this sickness in headlines that cover everything from war to women's rights, Scripture suggests that we have a long and complicated history with this particular illness.

Now some would throw up their hands and say “well, it looks like a problem we have to live with.” Or “Sin is just part of human nature - nothing we can do except keep our heads down and deal with the worst of it as best we can.”

Still others would seek to regulate behaviour that they believe is sinful - singling out the things that make them most uncomfortable and punishing that behaviour by force of law. And while that is not very controversial when we're talking about armed robbery or cold-blooded murder, the law has a lot of social and moral nuance that is founded in fear of moral failure - and that led to harsh penalties for minor drug offences, strict prohibitions on sexual activities, the demonization of LGBTQI persons, the mentally ill, and a host of other things that generated fear or anxiety in citizens and governments.

Attitudes change - governments change - moral measuring sticks change too - and currently we have experienced something like an awakening in our understanding of human sexual expression - the connection between mental illness and poverty (and a host of other social concerns). In Canada we have legalized same sex marriage, cannabis use, and abortion, while still a hot button topic of conversation, is treated as a medical procedure rather than a criminal one.

Even the church has changed - as within the PCC we have recently changed our policy and practice where LGBTQI clergy are concerned - we have recognized the harmful nature of our past behaviour and apologized publicly - and we are beginning to learn how to live into our apologies. All these are good things...

But some folks are still afraid.

"...but the bible says..." are four words you are sure to here in the midst of faith based discussions on the state of the world, or our attitudes toward sin. And that's only right - we are people of the Word, after all. Funny how no one wants to quote Galatians when we are embroiled in these high-test conversations about human behaviour...well, they make sure you hear about how Paul doesn't want us 'gratifying the flesh...' but they don't always explain what they mean by that. They think they're talking about sex, but Paul is talking about our fallen human nature - our desire to be right (and therefore comfortable and powerful) no matter what.

'Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.'

Yes fornication is at the top of the list -which means you likely missed all the rest - the oh so common habits of our daily living - enmities, strife, jealousy, anger quarrels dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing...and things like these. Paul here lists the habits that any one of us might engage in in the run of a day...but we want to legislate sex.

These habits of ours frighten us when we find them in other people - and Paul has an answer for that. Behave better.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

The gifts of the spirit are pretty much as you heard them. We don't have any trouble imagining these things in ourselves - we want to see ourselves in the light of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We have a more difficult time seeing these traits in others - and that is part of the disease - a symptom of our sin. It's why Paul's words are not enough. Jesus doesn't get quoted very often in our difficult debates - the conversations wracked with fear, anxiety and suspicion. And the reason Jesus isn't quoted often is because he so often asks us to look beyond our own lust for power and control. Look to God, he says - and when we won't, he points to other parts of the created order - the Lillies of the field. The ravens. The vast panorama of creation that relies on the creator - and praises God by the very existence. And all while unafraid.

When it comes to easing our fears, Jesus is the champ. He went about in the world unafraid - even to his execution - because he was guided by the Spirit that Paul holds up as our ideal. Jesus put the love of God into his every action - love constituted the kingdom that Jesus says is in the midst of us. This is the love that drives out fear - the love by which we must measure one another.

The world is always going to be a frightening place because we are in it. Jesus came to remind us that we could choose a better way. Don't be afraid. Seek in all things - in yourselves, and in one another - the love that God revealed in Jesus.