

Temperance
Galatians 5:22-26
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
1 February 2015

When the Holy Spirit is at work within us, we will develop these lovely fruits. Which of us wouldn't appreciate a little more love, joy, peace, and kindness in our lives? But what about that last fruit? One sign of the Spirit at work within us is the presence of self-control.

Which is a very modern name for what has traditionally been called "temperance." That's a fussy sounding word isn't it? Makes us think of the Temperance League, of Carrie Nation wielding her axe as she campaigned for the prohibition of alcohol.

Temperance is associated with virtues such as abstinence, modesty, chastity, and restraint—ones that also sound fussy and that we would often rather ignore. They remind us of what we like least about church.

For many of us grew up with the idea that religion was supposed to help us regulate and control our desires, so that we could avoid temptation and live as faithful followers of Jesus. The great French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote a three volume work on how our society developed these ideas of controlling and regulating our pleasures and desires. He mentions St. Augustine whose classic memoir is entitled *Confessions* (and that title alone should give some hint as to Augustine's view of pleasure). In the memoir Augustine told stories of his youth, of the pleasurable times spent with friends. The adult Augustine, reflecting on those pleasures wonders if underneath the apparent innocence if there wasn't in fact something dark and dangerous. Foucault writes that it was "one of the characteristic traits of the Christian experience of the 'flesh' . . . that the subject is expected to exercise suspicion often, to be able to recognize from afar the manifestations of a stealthy, resourceful, and dreadful power."

Yeah, that sounds a lot like how I was raised—never trusting my own desires, always afraid that I was committing sin that would damn me for eternity, therefore I became something of a hyper-vigilant prude. I think I'm still suffering from some of those religion-induced neuroses all these years later.

All the rules of right behavior we learned at church seemed to overpower all of the other aspects of our religion. It was difficult at times to delight in what was good and beautiful and desirable about being a religious person if all we were doing was learning that everything that seemed fun and pleasurable was off limits.

For instance, in my small-town, Oklahoma, Southern Baptist upbringing most popular music was considered sinful. The lyrics were lustful. They disrespected parental authority. Listening to them could lead to youthful rebellion. Therefore, the music was to be avoided.

The church I grew up in hosted big, well-attended seminars for parents to warn them all about the dangers of popular music. You may remember this as the era when Tipper Gore, then a leader in the Religious Right, was on her crusade to get some lyrics censored or banned.

There was no singer who made the religious people I knew more nervous than

Madonna. Her very name was a mockery of religion. Much less how she dressed and acted, flaunting her sexuality. She then went beyond the pale when she recorded the song “Like a Prayer” and released its video filled with religious imagery and sexual themes.

So, we weren’t supposed to listen to “Like a Prayer.” But I guess it played on the radio enough that I did get to know it. And I really liked the song. But I could never admit that. So, whenever it would play, I’d have sing along under my breath.

Life is a mystery
Everyone must stand alone
I hear you call my name
And it feels like home

(Okay, I must admit that it was with some subversive glee that after I typed that on Thursday, I turned on “Like a Prayer” and danced to it. In my preacher’s study.)

If you grew up in a strict religious community, then you probably reached a point in your early adulthood when you were done with that and enjoyed the liberation of casting it off. I remember how much twenty-two year old Scott Jones delighted in drinking, cussing, and listening to whatever music I wanted to as loud as I wanted to.

(Hopefully we mature out of our youthful rebellion and indulgences.)

So, can we recover this virtue from its fussiness? Can we talk about shaping our desires while avoiding the repressive, prudish, neurosis-inducing type of religion?

I think we can. Aristotle, who wrote the early book on the virtues, was not opposed to pleasures and desires like some of his colleagues were. Rather, he taught pleasure was a good thing, we simply needed to learn how to desire and enjoy the right things in the right ways. We need to learn moderation.

Puritan theologian Richard Baxter wrote “We shall never be capable of clearly knowing till we are capable of fully enjoying.” Our own desires, then, are a way for us to know God, as God has placed those desires within us. Through our desires God speaks to us and calls to us.

Remember, we explored this idea during Advent in 2012 when our theme was “What’s Your Wish?” We had a wishing tree here at the front of the sanctuary, and I invited all of you to share what your deepest desires were by writing them on slips of colorful paper that we then hung on the tree throughout the holiday season. Later I looked through all those desires. Many were wishes for your families. Others were seeking healing or help with a problem. Quite a few expressed a desire for the world—for justice, peace, the alleviation of poverty. My favourite one I kept, and it hangs now on the side of the file cabinet in my office. Some child wrote in red crayon the three-letter word “cat.” (I still don’t know if she received a cat that year for Christmas or not; I need to find out.)

The fiery Spirit at the heart of life ignites our desire, whereas sin would actually tempt us away from joy. According to theologian Belden Lane, the great Protestant Reformer John Calvin “defined sin on occasion as a matter of ‘dullness,’ a lack of imaginative insight, a pathetic failure in taking delight.”

The Holy Spirit lures us away from dullness to enjoyment and imagination. Belden Lane

continues, "From this perspective, redemption means being delivered from the banality of sin and summoned to true wildness," which he then defines as "a high-spirited celebration of God's presence in an astonishing world."

And so the fiery Spirit works within us, burning the chaff, renewing us in love, shaping our desires and wishes, and giving us a new perspective. For so much of the spiritual life is learning to see in a new way. To see and understand our neighbors and their joys and concerns. To see and understand the troubled systems of the world and to respond by trying to improve them. To see and understand how God loves us and is working for us. To see and understand ourselves, who we are, and who we can yet be.

The virtue of temperance, then, is not about denying ourselves pleasure, repressing our desires, or looking over our shoulders in dread, which ends up giving us neuroses. Rather, we practice the virtue of temperance when we delight in the beauty of God's creation by desiring the right things in the right ways. The virtue is born within us as the Holy Spirit works, shaping us to become more loving and joyful, more peaceful and patient, kinder, gentler, more generous and loyal.

So let us pray:

Take my will; your will be done.
Make your will and mine be one.
Take my heart and by your grace
Make of it your dwelling place.

Take my life, God, let it be
Consecrated faithfully.