

Fruit of the Spirit: Self-Control

2 Timothy 1:1-7, Gal. 5:22/23 by Patty Friesen (Oct. 6/19)

It is fitting that we should speak of self-control the Sunday before Thanksgiving in preparation for a weekend of eating. 2 Timothy addresses the faithful life of an individual Christian. The letter assumes that Paul writes from prison, probably toward the end of his life, to encourage Timothy who will carry on his work. One of the major concerns of Paul's letter to Timothy is the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus. Paul references to his own ancestors as well as Timothy's mother and grandmother, reflect the assumption that faith thrives in the family. Paul's ancestors worshipped God and Timothy's faith first lived in Lois his grandmother and Eunice his mother. These references to long-lived faith in families serves to counter any Roman suspicions about Christianity as a new and therefore suspicious religion.

Paul encourages Timothy to rekindle the gifts of God, which are power, love and self-control. Paul suggests that self-control is a gift from God - prayed for and received by the laying on of hands along with love and power – necessary gifts for leadership particularly. We read in Galatians 5 that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit - the result of the infusion of the Holy Spirit to create this quality that may not come naturally to us. Titus 2:11-13 The grace of God teaches us to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Self-control comes from the grace of God. We need a Higher Power.

But it is a collaborative work - a gift that comes from God through prayer and comes from our cooperation and practice. Practicing self-control requires daily effort on

our part through prayer and confession of our need and the daily rehearsal of self-regulating and saying no to comfort food or binge-watching TV or shopping. It is a life-long collaborative work between our will and the work of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 9:25 Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

The Apocrypha, writings in Catholic Bibles that sit in between the Old and New Testaments approach self-control as a *reasoned* effort of the mind and the individual's effort to control the mind and desires. The Book of Wisdom 8:6-8 If understanding is effective, she teaches self-control and prudence, justice and courage; nothing in life is more profitable for mortals than these. Sirach 18:29-31 Those who become wise, Do not follow base desires, but restrain appetites. 2 Esdras 7: The faces of those who practice self-control shall shine more than the stars. 4 Maccabees 1 To everyone who is seeking knowledge, and rational judgment; reason rules over those emotions that hinder self-control, namely, gluttony and lust, 4 it is also clear that it masters the emotions that hinder one from justice, such as malice, and those that stand in the way of courage, namely anger, fear, and pain. Rational judgment is sovereign over the emotions by virtue of the restraining power of self-control.

The Apocrypha makes it sound like if we just tried hard enough with our brains and will power - we could attain self-control whereas other scriptures assume that we need a higher power. It is both. Self-control may be a bit of reasoned willpower especially when it comes to fall housecleaning my windows. If I can get myself reasoned that if I do it today, I don't have to do it later, I can get it done. That's reasoned self-control. But when it comes to deeper issues of self-control like controlling my anger and

criticizing my life-partner and siblings - I need a higher power to help with self-control. I need the inner conviction of the Holy Spirit that I've hurt people and confession to those I hurt and I need a trusted spiritual friend or sponsor who asks me how I am doing with my anger and self-control.

Scripture focuses on self-control because the *lack* of it is a disaster for personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of families and communities. Proverbs 25:27-29. It is not good to eat too much honey, or to seek honor on top of honor. Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control. Like a city breached, without walls - without healthy boundaries in eating, shopping, drinking, speaking and safe touch - the city collapses. Without self-control and healthy boundaries the personal well-being and the social interconnectedness of people collapses. There is actually more in scripture about the sins of gluttony, over-eating and harsh words than there is about over-drinking.

Having said that, I will focus on the healing power for self-control and self-regulation that has been created through Alcoholics Anonymous that is a model for all kinds of healing. We prayed the Serenity Prayer this morning, the prayer that is used in meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. For those streaming with us, they may have thought they somehow got the Mennonite Alcoholics Anonymous channel!

Alcoholic Anonymous knows that self-control is not merely about having enough willpower. AA knows that we over consume alcohol because of hurts and brokenness in our lives that we are struggling to deal with daily and it assumes that addiction is an illness - a physiological, biological and psychological illness that hinders our ability to self-regulate. AA also knows that healing and self-control is cultivated through confession of vulnerability and the admission of lack of self-control and the need for a support-

ive community. AA knows the need for spiritual power, God, someone greater than ourselves to help us with our lack of self-control. AA knows the need for a trusted community like a local AA meeting where others are struggling with the same illness and who understand the journey and the self-delusions. AA knows the need for a trusted sponsor - someone who has been down the same tough path of addiction, someone to pick us up and to keep us accountable.

Alcoholics Anonymous is like church and maybe church needs to become more like AA. At church, we're here because we need a Higher Power. We're here because we believe God our Creator has made us good and loves us and gives us the strength we need. We're here because we believe Jesus is God's best expression and he saves us from ourselves by showing us the way of life. We're here because we believe the Holy Spirit is God's own Spirit gifted to our souls to guide us, convict us and give us the strength needed for self-control.

In church, we nurture relationships through personal sharing and vulnerability in safe small groups like Sunday School, men's groups, women's groups and in committee work. We nurture mentorships with our young people and could nurture spiritual friendships between adults that are more accountable. We'll talk and pray about that at deacons. Deacons were the original sponsors in the early church in the Book of Acts, providing safe meeting space and sharing of meals and accountability.

We've talked in Sunday School about how the umbrella of perfection in church - "be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" has created an illusion and burden of perfection under which we may feel we cannot share our imperfections, our humanity, our sinfulness, our lack of self-control. The burden of perfection is that we feel so much

shame when we mess up or feel we don't measure up. It's shame that fuels our addictions. As long as we are trying to avoid shame through escapes and through self-medication, we will continue in our addictions. It is only confession and forgiveness and acceptance that takes the power out of shame and gets us healthy and gets us self-control. It is the hardest work in the world that can only be done with God's help, confession and trusted companionship.

Let us pray: God our Strength and Help and Hope, we each one come with our imperfections this morning, our escapes and our addictions. We need you and the good habits you offer us to succeed in our lives and in our social relationships. Help us. We cannot do this work alone. We trust in you and in the support of our community. Amen.