

2010 02 14 Friendship & Wesley United Church Sermon (Andrew MacKay)

Thank you for inviting me to share with you this morning. I have heard wonderful things about you, and it is my prayer that God will use me as a blessing in your lives today. I understand that it has been quite some time since you have heard from a YFC/Youth Unlimited representative, so if I may, I would like to share a little bit about who we are and what we do.

Youth Unlimited sees the hope and potential in every young person.

We believe that a relevant presentation of the person and teachings of Jesus must address the culture of the day and include responsible practical responses to poverty, homelessness, addiction, violence and other issues facing youth at risk.

I visit Prince Edward Collegiate Institute at lunch time 4-5 times a week. I meet with and support students in the gym, library, cafeteria and classroom. I oversee a student led bible study on Thursdays, and provide leadership to a youth group called Campus Life on Wednesday Evenings. We also organize a number of outreach events which are outlined in our brochure which I will leave here for you to take home and look at.

I chose these verses to share with you because they have become my theme verses this year as I minister to our youth, and they serve as an important reminder for me as I live out my faith.

Galatians 5:13-26 (CEV)

¹³My friends, you were chosen to be free. So don't use your freedom as an excuse to do anything you want. Use it as an opportunity to serve each other with love. ¹⁴All that the Law says can be summed up in the command to love others as much as you love yourself. ¹⁵But if you keep attacking each other like wild animals, you had better watch out or you will destroy yourselves.

¹⁶If you are guided by the Spirit, you won't obey your selfish desires. ¹⁷The Spirit and your desires are enemies of each other. They are always fighting each other and keeping you from doing what you feel you should. ¹⁸But if you obey the Spirit, the Law of Moses has no control over you.

¹⁹People's desires make them give in to immoral ways, filthy thoughts, and shameful deeds. ²⁰They worship idols, practice witchcraft, hate others, and are hard to get along with. People become jealous, angry, and selfish. They not only argue and cause trouble, but they are ²¹envious. They get drunk, carry on at wild parties, and do other evil things as well. I told you before, and I am telling you again: No one who does these things will share in the blessings of God's kingdom.

²²God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, ²³gentle, and self-controlled. There is no law against behaving in any of these ways. ²⁴And because we belong to Christ Jesus, we have killed our selfish feelings and desires. ²⁵God's Spirit has given us life, and so we should follow the Spirit. ²⁶But don't be conceited or make others jealous by claiming to be better than they are.

These verses should sound familiar. Verses 22-23 are commonly known as the "Fruit Of the Spirit". In my opinion, a beautiful reminder of what life looks like when we completely submit our lives to God, and perhaps a measuring stick of spiritual maturity.

In this passage, Paul is challenging the Galatians to rethink the way they are living out their faith. Over time, they turned their back on the grace filled life that comes through their faith in Christ and replaced it with a religion based on rules & works. Essentially, they were following all the laws, rituals and routines that the Jews followed before Christ came to set them free.

So Paul clearly brings to their attention the folly of their ways. By choosing to live by the Laws of Moses, they are saying to God that they don't need His help, and they think they can live a sinless life which will be enough to earn their ticket to heaven. The difficulty is their sinful nature always led them into all kinds of trouble. Even though they were pretty good at following the rules set out in the Old Testament, they were beginning to compete with each other to see who was best. They became stubborn, jealous, angry and selfish; the very behaviour that is expected from someone who doesn't know God.

If you have followed me this far, you are probably wondering, what does this have to do with Youth Unlimited, and why has Andrew chosen this as his theme for the year? Well, it goes like this. Even though I believe with all my heart that Christ, lived and died for me, and everyone on earth for that matter, I, like the Galatians tend to choose ritual and rules over grace and a changed heart.

A few years ago I read a book called “The End of Religion” that told of a story about a woman named Sue Prunebottom who one Valentine’s day decided to challenge her husband to increase the level of romance in their relationship. To her amazement, the next Tuesday, he surprised her by booking a baby sitter, and bringing her out to a fancy restaurant. They were greeted by the manager, and escorted to a romantic candle lit table in the back corner of the restaurant. When she sat down, she found a card at her place with a personalized love note in it written by her husband. They enjoyed some meaningful conversation and delicious food, and at the end of the meal she was moved to tears when he presented her with her favourite flower, a blue rose.

This was possibly the most romantic night of her life. She began to see new hope for her marriage, and life seemed exciting. To her surprise, the following Tuesday her husband had once again booked a baby sitter and planned another romantic date. She was a little caught off guard when she told her to wear the same red dress, and he took her to the same restaurant, but she was willing to overlook those things thinking it was still a nice gesture. But when the restaurant manager escorted them to the same table which had a card with almost exactly the same things written in it and the whole evening right down to the conversation seemed to be a scripted version of the week before, Sue was moved to tears once again, but this time the tears were not evoked by the same romantic emotion.

What started out as something extremely special ended up becoming a weekly routine that made Bob feel like the most romantic man alive, but left Sue feeling lonely and misunderstood.

I sometimes wonder if we treat God in the same kind of way that Bob treated his wife.

We get so caught up in the formula, routine and rules of church and life that we miss out on the true purpose and calling God has put on our lives. The Galatians had the same problem. They got so caught up in following the rules, that they had no time so serve the people who needed help the most. And I bet that the devil just loves it too.

John 10:10

“A thief comes only to rob, kill, and destroy. I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest.”

I need to be constantly reminded that what makes me a Christian isn't the fact that I go to church every week, pray every day, read my bible, sing songs, donate money and work for Youth Unlimited. What makes me a Christian is that God loved me enough to send his Son to die in my place. And because of His love for me; I will submit my life wholeheartedly to the one who knows me better than I know myself, so that He can turn me into the loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled person He needs me to be.

And when God has me where he needs me to be, I will be ready to do whatever spontaneous, romantic, exciting, risky, miraculous task God puts before me. When God is working through us, we can be sure that we are living life to the fullest!

Over the years, I have had the pleasure of being used by God in a number of different ways. I often find myself in situations where I am helping a teenager deal with an ugly break up, or family problems. These are great opportunities that are simply a result of showing people that I care and being available in their lives. Other ways that God has used Youth Unlimited are through things like our Project Serve Trips which came to fruition out of our desire to be a blessing to other parts of the world. When Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans, we assembled a team of teens and adults to go and serve wherever we were needed. This has turned into an annual event involving up to 75 teenagers from Quinte each year, learning to serve and love others in need.

At around the same time as the Project Serve trips were getting established, I was working with group of teens from the County who saw a need for a local concrete skatepark in our community. We didn't feel like we had a lot to offer, but the more we worked at it, the more we began to get recognition from Councillors and other members of County Staff. Today, the skatepark is under construction, and it will include a playground and clubhouse which has a total worth of 1.5 million dollars. It has been a glorious adventure along the way, and it all started because we asked God how we could be a blessing in our community. I can't wait to see what's next.

God wants to use all of us in creative and exciting ways. The key is taking time to creatively use our gifts and abilities in ways that make God happy. I heard on the CBC news earlier this week about a group called the "Raging Grannies" who make it their goal to creatively cause positive change in their communities. In one case, they saw a need for improvement in the Health Care System, so they went to a nursing home and cried in the hall way for 40 minutes. The police had to remove them from the building. When local news came to see what all the fuss was about, the grannies gladly told the reporters about their frustrations with the Health Care system. Again, the result was positive change. Serving God doesn't always have to look 'spiritual'.

I want to emphasize an important point for you this morning. This romantic adventure with God that I have been talking about isn't just for me and the teenagers I work with. God has something heart pounding in store for each of you. The question is, will you take the time to reflect on our Lord, and to let Him lead you into the exciting unknown?