Romans 12:9-21  
“Petals or Fruit”

Do you know what I really love? I love pears. They are green and sweet and a wonderful treat on a hot day. But pears do not just appear in the grocery store. Pears grow on trees. They start out as these very pretty flowers. Over time the petals fall off as the fruit begins to grow; and then there are the pears and no petals at all. The reason I bring this up is because this morning we are going to talk about fruitfulness. We are going to explore the question, what is really more important; the fruit or the petals?

When it comes to the church we have a lot of rules and traditions which are supposed to help us to fall more in love with God and to help us do a better job of loving one another. One of those traditions is what we wear to church on Sunday morning. When it is time to go to church I often think of the phrase, “Put on your Sunday best.” The men wear ties and jackets. Some of y’all even wear bow ties to be a little fancier. The ladies wear dresses. The children are all dressed up. My, what pretty, pretty petals we are wearing this Sunday morning! I think it is great so many of us dress up for Sunday morning. Look at me, I even put on a fancy robe. But I wonder; what is more important, the clothes we wear, or the fruit we bear? What is more important; the clothes we wear or the fruit we bear?

This morning’s message comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans. The church in Rome was new. It is very likely there were not a lot of former Jews in the church at Rome. This meant the majority of its members were likely converts from Roman paganism. So Paul has the ticklish job of helping the Romans to better understand what it means to live a set apart life as a follower of Jesus Christ. Now as a former Pharisee Paul knows all about living a set apart life. The Jews were called to live a set a part life by God. That was a part of the purpose for God giving the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. After the Babyonians sacked Jerusalem the Jewish people were scattered. 75 years later the Jewish people were allowed to return. It was the group who became the Pharisees who wanted to make sure the people were never scattered again. The Pharisees tried to make sure they were not scattered by trying to keep the people obedient to God’s Law. Paul was arguably the strictest Pharisee of his generation. Paul even persecuted the followers of the way of Jesus Christ. Paul believed the followers of the way of Jesus Christ were not following God’s Law. (**pause**) But then a wonderful thing happened. Jesus knocked Paul off of his high horse. Paul discovered through Jesus Christ there is more to life than the black and white letter of the Law. There is more to the Law than rules and traditions. There is something deeper and more wonderful – what Dr. Elaine Heath calls “the tradition behind the tradition.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

As a Provisional Elder I am required by the Book of Discipline to be a part of a specific accountability group and work through a process called Residency In Ordained Ministry or RIOM for short. One of the books they are having us to read this year is “God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church” by Dr. Elaine Heath. Dr. Heath contends the, “Tradition behind the tradition is always primary.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul as a Pharisee, knew the Law of Moses inside and out, and yet when Paul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus something changed. If we read the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew we can see Jesus did not come to destroy the Law; rather, that neither one jot nor tittle would be taken away. How can this be when the Holy Spirit sends Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles? The Gentiles are not the chosen people. How can this be when God tells Peter to rise, kill and eat what has been considered unclean? How can this be when the Holy Spirit shows up to baptize the Gentiles Peter is called to visit? It’s breaking the Law – right? All of these instances are breaking the letter of the Law. (**Pause**) Could it be there is a tradition behind the tradition which is the whole point of the Law?

Let’s look at what Paul is telling the Romans in chapter 12 verses 9-21. (**Read Romans 12:9-21 aloud.**) The Apostle Paul is absolutely asking the Church in Rome to obey the Law of Moses. Paul just isn’t calling it the Law of Moses. Paul is telling the church in Rome to obey the tradition behind the tradition – to model the behavior the Law was intended to bring about in us. The tradition behind the tradition is the behavior for which God praised Abraham. If we take a step back from the the black and white letter of the Law of Moses we get what Paul is talking about right here. Paul is not saying obey all 644 commandments of the Old Testament. Paul is saying obey the tradition behind the tradition. Paul is saying love God and love other people. If you think about all of the times the Pharisees accuse Jesus of breaking the Law or try to trap Jesus into breaking the Law Jesus was actually fulfilling the intent of the Law: “[t]o love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might,” and, “[t]o love your neighbor as yourself (Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18). Jesus goes further to say we should love others as Jesus loves us.

How did Jesus do all of this? By actually; genuinely; really loving us. Jesus never paid lip service to love. Jesus never just talked about love. When Jesus says, “God so loved the world God sent God’s only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,” I believe Jesus means it (John 3:16). Jesus demonstrated God’s love by condescending to be born and grow up like any one of us, by walking and living among the disciples, and by being aglow in the Spirit. Think about the crucifixion. At any time the Son of God – more than that – God could have destroyed every one of His captors during the trial, the beatings, the scourgings, the crucifixion – any of it. Instead Christ patiently endured. When Jesus was hung on the cross Jesus asked for God the Father to forgive those who had done these terrible things to Him.

In terms of hospitality who was more hospitable than Jesus? Jesus ate with sinners, Pharisees and tax collectors alike without preference or reservation. How many of us can say we are willing to do that? Jesus wept with widows, and celebrated with those who repented, and turned back to God. Jesus often ate and spent time with outcasts and the unclean – people deemed too lowly by the Law – the lepers, the unclean, the divorced and the harlots.

Sisters and brothers Jesus exemplifies the kind of behavior Paul is trying to explain in this letter to the church in Rome. Paul is very, very well acquainted with what a tradition of specific rule following looks like. Human beings are pushers, benders and breakers of rules and laws. If you don’t believe me spend an afternoon with a toddler. However, the Law of Moses was meant to make the Jews a set apart – peculiar people. Surely the Law set them apart, but the tradition behind the Law is what made them fruitful. What Paul is really talking about goes all the way back in Israel’s history to people like David who was a man after God’s own heart; to Abraham whom God called to be a blessing to the nations; all the way back to Abel who’s offering was more pleasing to God. Could it be what made Abel’s sacrifice more pleasing, Abraham’s relationship with God stronger, and David a man after God’s own heart was a love that put God first above all other aspects of their lives? (**pause**) Brothers and sisters hear me when I say this. Our lives are made fruitful through the love we express for God in the love we share with others. We are not created to stay flowers who dress nice on Sunday morning then have something ugly to say to the waitress at lunch. We are called to be people who blossom in worship and then offer fruits of God’s love to others all week long. Being fruitful is what comes from putting God first. Remember this brothers and sisters. God is much more interested in our being fruitful than in our looking pretty.

1. Elaine A. Heath. “God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church “. (Upper Room Books 2016) Kindle edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)