

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 2024
FREEDOM IS A BIGGER FLEX THAN SOUP REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN
SCRIPTURE: GALATIANS 2:15-21

Galatians 2:15-21

15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, **16** yet we know that a person is justified[c] not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ.[d] And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ[e] and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. **17** But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! **18** But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. **19** For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, **20** and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God,[f] who loved me and gave himself for me. **21** I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness[g] comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Sermon: Freedom is a Bigger Flex than Soup

This is our second week of saying “a hui hou” to our interns for the summer – this Sunday is Avery’s last Sunday with us, and this sermon is dedicated to her for all the hard work she put in for us at Kailua Christian Church.

Avery has Galatians 2:20 tattooed on her arm, so it moves everything that she does. She keeps the verse close to her, and in doing so, she displays a pastoral character that should guide the rest of us. I’m not saying that we should all get tattoos, but as Christians, we should all follow Avery’s example and keep “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” metaphorically on our right arms. But what does that mean, exactly? Obviously I am still alive, and why should I replace my living, breathing self with a carpenter who died 2000 years ago? What does that even look like?

The interns had some assigned readings this summer to help orient them to what we hoped they would take away from the program. One of the books they read is called “I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!” by Paul Nixon. In the book, the author recommends that at least one person in the leadership of every church needs to have had a personal encounter with Jesus and live into their testimony about why they follow Him. He explains that without that one leader of the church holding up a space of testimony that Jesus lives in them, churches can fall into the danger of forgetting what they’re doing and drift into, in his words, a “spiritual coma.”

I don’t have any doubts that Avery will someday be a powerful beacon of Jesus’ light in the churches she serves, because Avery lives and breathes her testimony of Jesus alive in her. She doesn’t just have the verse tattooed on her arm; she centers back to Him with every thought and experience she’s encountered here this summer. At every Pā’ina Night discussion, Avery was always the first to ponder aloud what Jesus might say or do about whatever topic was up for discussion. She recently explained to our kupuna at the Plaza that she often prays by imagining Jesus sitting next to her and just talking story with Him like an old friend. The spirit of

Christ is alive in Avery and she will be a good Pastor that never allows her congregation to suffer from the “spiritual coma” that so many of our churches are experiencing in our age.

You might be thinking, “well, good for Avery, but what about me? How do I die to myself so that Christ may live in me?” There’s a phrase that was developed by a Congregationalist pastor named Charles Sheldon at the turn of the 20th century called “What Would Jesus Do (WWJD)?” that was meant to rephrase Galatians 2:20 in a palatable way for a modern audience. Rev. Sheldon’s goal in popularizing “WWJD” was to call the church into action and live out what Jesus asks of us in feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, uplifting the captive and oppressed. It was meant to be a simplified way for Christians to recall Christ in everyday life and live out the Gospel message as we are meant to in a tangible, layman’s way.

Yet, you’ve heard me preach before about how churches often go out giving things to the poor and things like that and inadvertently make the problem worse. The interns had another reading this summer to help them in their work at the shelters: “Toxic Charity” by Robert Lupton. In this book, the author describes how churches often “do stuff” that infantilizes the people they work with and encourages a paternalistic system that doesn’t result in thriving change for the populations they are attempting to serve. When we reduce Jesus to a set of actions, we risk removing him from the equation altogether, which isn’t “Christ living in us” at all. Christ living in our hearts is clearly more than just what we do for the least of these as a mechanical reaction to the Gospel.

We should do the actions of Jesus in feeding the poor and visiting the prisoner. However, we should do it in the spirit that Avery exemplifies rather than reducing Christ’s power to a set of simplistic actions. When we interviewed Avery, she’d had a number of experiences with working with poor and struggling populations in shelters, prisons, and developing countries, as the Gospel calls us to do. She repeatedly mentioned that through these experiences, she saw the threats of “spiritual coma” of doing works without the power of the Holy Spirit guiding the experience. She believed that our faith encourages us to go beyond the experience of unilateral service; that is, service where those with means “give” to those without and call it a day. Instead, Avery insisted that the way to let Christ truly live in us that exemplifies the old phrase “What Would Jesus Do?” is actually two fold: Yes, we bless others because we have been blessed, and because Jesus asked us to. But more importantly, we have to be convicted in our souls by His saving power and grace, and be willing to extend that radical love to others by inviting them to give up their old ways and follow Jesus into His.

When Avery gave her heart to Christ just a few years ago, she realized how much freedom there is in letting go of yourself. There’s so much freedom in letting go of your fears and anxieties, the expectations that others have for you, the ways of the world that you’re caught in that feel unhelpful or oppressive. Discovering Jesus’ power lifted Avery out of experiences of helplessness and empowered her to become fully who He meant her to be. This happened for Avery, and for others in whom Jesus lives, because the magic of Jesus is that He triumphs over every rule we humans create for ourselves and each other. He triumphs over every negative experience, relationship gone wrong, or trauma incurred, and has the unique power to heal it if

we let go of ourselves and let Him take over. Jesus is more than just handing out soup on a Sunday afternoon; He is an invitation to be forever changed so that we are no longer shackled by the many ways of the world that hold us down. Through Him, we can transcend the broken places – whether that’s difficult family relationships, work, health, oppressive legal systems – Jesus has power to help us rise above literally all of it. And that freedom is a bigger flex than soup.

When we die to ourselves and let Christ live in us, it means we’re willing to let go of all the things we want to control in our lives – bad bosses, difficult families, and even heavier things like war and disease, and know that Jesus has power to deliver us from the shackles of those problems. He did it on the Cross by forgiving us for killing him even when we didn’t deserve it, and then resurrecting into new life despite our attempts to hold Him down. He invites us to free ourselves of those places of hurt and into new life in Him that kills our own ways that keeps us trapped and instead recenter on Him.

So – how do we die to ourselves and let Christ live in us? What would Jesus do that we should be doing also? Jesus reached out to the poor, oppressed, and brokenhearted, not only to feed them bread, but to feed them a new way that empowers them into belonging in God’s Kingdom. In His Spirit, we Christians have the most magnificent power to change the world if we let Jesus live in us.

Friends, I urge you to be convicted not only that we’re meant to feed the poor, but that we’re sent by Him to empower others into the freedom He provides. Jesus died for every person in this room, every person you don’t like, and every person you do. Jesus wants to see all of us to be empowered like Avery to live a new life that is free from the shackles of pain and difficulty that threaten to hold us down in this life. Jesus wants to see all those difficult relationships healed by laying them before his feet and letting Him transform them. That freedom is a bigger flex than soup, and it’s a flex that is yours to deliver to others who need it, too.

Christ lives in you. Every one of you has His power alive in you by your baptism that you can tap into if you simply search for it. May He guide you toward His purpose for you so that through Christ in you, the whole world can be made free under the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.