

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Andy Turns Fifty Seven”
Galatians 5:13-25
June 26, 2012

Andronicus turned 57 last Thursday.

His friends threw him a birthday party again this year. It has become their custom since his wife died three and a half years ago. She was the only one who ever still called him Andronicus, so the banner over his front door just said, “Happy Birthday Andy.”

It was a great party they put together. Everyone from the neighborhood showed up. Several of his co-workers were there. His daughter, Phoebe, and her three kids were running around. The grandkids always made Andy feel alive again. In fact, just about everyone was there... everyone except his wife, of course... and his son Levi.

You see, Andy had a falling out with his son about 6 months after his wife died. She was always better at talking to him than Andy was. It seemed like no matter how Andy tried with his son, things always blew up. The two of them butt heads on everything from politics, to religion, to sports, to pizza toppings. For some reason, it was always hard for Andy to connect with Levi... even when he was little. Now that Levi's grown, it feels like a lost cause. Andy just can't seem to have enough patience, or empathy... or something, with Levi.... He doesn't know what.

The birthday party, though, was great. Andy *enjoyed* himself that night. In fact, he enjoyed himself a little too much. He's always been the life of the party. It's probably why so many folks had shown up. Everyone liked being around Andy. The funny thing was, he doesn't quite remember them leaving. In fact, there wasn't much about the end of the evening that he remembered the next morning.

It wasn't like him to go overboard like that, but this year he did. Most of his friends thought he was just celebrating. It was his birthday after all. But the pit in his stomach the next morning betrayed him.

It's the same emptiness that has haunted him most of his life. It's just gotten stronger the last few years... what, with his wife gone, his son distant. Fifty-seven. It didn't exactly look the way Andy expected it to look.

He tried to not let it get to him. “There's a lot I have to be thankful for,” he'd tell himself. There's Phoebe and her three little ones. They're wonderful. And of course I still have my health and my job. And a lot of people have it a lot worse.”

He tried to stay positive. In fact, no one ever worried about Andy. “He's done so well...” they'd say to each other. It is sure looked that way. His business kept moving forward. His playful side rebounded a few months after his loss.

But there was that emptiness... That part of him that he could ignore at times, but it wouldn't stay away. Every now and then, it took over.

Sometimes that dull aching in his gut looked like it did last Thursday night. He tries to cram in a year's worth of fun and excitement into one night, as if he could fill the emptiness up and make it go away.

Other times it shows up like it did the last time he talked to Levi. Out of that great black hole within him, a flash of anger had come raging again. It's the same temper that would flash out at his late wife. He doesn't know why he would get so angry or irritable. But now that she's gone... he hates himself for it... for the things he said to her... for ***how irritable he could be with those he loved the most.***

Andronicus turned 57 last Thursday. The morning after his headache was accompanied by the emptiness again... but somehow larger and more present than it tends to be. So, the one thing he couldn't stand was sitting there alone, inside his home, on the South East region of Galatia. Friday was market day for his cloth. Andy didn't need to be at the shop. His apprentice was running things for him today. But, where else would he go?

So, he walked the mile and half to the center of town. He checked in on things. Said hello to his apprentice, and to the shopkeepers next door. He was his typical smiling self around them, but he couldn't keep it up very long today. So, after making some excuse he kept walking.

Things were pretty crowded that day. The market place was full. But around the corner was one of Andy's favorite spots. Just a block off the main street was a large stone. It's a stone that he and his wife used to sit on to watch the sun set...

Andy turned the corner, and saw someone already sitting there... a short bald man, a bit homely, but with a kind face. Andy's heart sank just a bit to see his stone occupied, but since there really wasn't any other place to go, he decided to sit down too.

"Do you mind?" he asked the stranger.

"Not at all."

"My name is Andronicus. Friends call me Andy."

"I'm Saul. Friends call me Paul."

Andy thought it was strange to see an unfamiliar face. He'd lived in that area all his life and knew (or at least recognized) just about everyone. Despite being unfamiliar, the stranger didn't make him feel uncomfortable. Quite the opposite, actually. There was a warmth to his presence... a comfort. Something about him that put Andy at ease.

"Hot day," Andy said.

“Yes, it is.” The man smiled. There was a deep kindness in his eyes. **“Andy, is it?”**

“That’s right.” Andy said.

“Well... happy birthday.”

“Thanks... Wait, how did you...?”

“I saw the banner out side what I’m guessing was your house on my way through town last night.”

“Oh. Sure.”

“How many years?”

“Fifty-seven.”

“Hummm...” Paul said, nodding his head.

“What? Do I look older?”

“No, it’s not that... just unhappy.”

That took Andy by surprise. “What makes you say that? I’m happy.”

“No, you’re not. It’s there, in your eyes.”

Andy was feeling a little defensive at this point. This stranger doesn’t know anything about him, and here he was telling him how he felt. “Not that it’s any of your business,” Andy said, “But I’m very happy. I have two kids, three grandkids, and a successful cloth business. Life has been good to me.”

“Oh, I’m sure it has. But, I’m not the one that needs convincing,” Paul said in a very even keel tone that for some reason really irritated Andy.

“What do you know?” Andy shot back.

“For one thing,” Paul says, **“I know following the rules isn’t enough.”**

“Who said anything about rules?”

“You didn’t have to. It’s the way you described your life. Family, Kids, Career: check, check, check. Sounds like you’ve done it by the book, Andy. But you’re sitting here, arguing with a stranger, the day after your birthday with anger in your voice... like you’re trying to hide something... or afraid maybe?... Afraid of being found out, I’d guess.”

And there it was. Paul’s words had just knocked the wind out of him. Andy just stared at him for a moment, with his mouth half gaping open... his cheeks flush... and his voice caught in his throat. He turned his head away and his eyes began to wet with tears he forced to stop.

You see, it was true. He *was* afraid of being found out. Thursday was his 57th birthday. And he's still pretending. And he can't figure out why he does that, and why he feels empty, and why he still gets angry. But he does.

After a long silence, Andy starts to tell this stranger on the bench about Levi and how things have always been hard with him. And he tells him about losing his wife... and the party last night, and the emptiness that follows him... It just starts flowing out of Andy.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Paul says.

"Yeah me too. Sometimes I don't think I know who I am, anymore." Andy said with a sigh.

"Well," Paul says, "if you want to find out, be guided by the Spirit." Paul says.

"What do you mean?"

Paul turned toward him to look him directly. **"Look, Andy, I can see you miss your wife, and carry this guilt and regret over things with you son, but they are only the triggers for your pain, Andy. They aren't the source."**

"Of course they are," Andy said. "If she hadn't died, things would be better with Levi... and 57 would be a whole lot different."

"Sure, some things would be different." Paul said. **"But *you* wouldn't be different."**

You'd still be irritable with your wife.

You'd still put on a show for your friends.

You'd still be haunted by that emptiness you described.

You'd still feel distant from Levi.

You wouldn't be different, Andy, *because you'd still be living your life half asleep to your truest self.*

"What are you talking about?" Andy asked.

"The spark of God is within you, Andy. The Spirit of God. It's who you are. It's your deepest essence. ... You are made with the Divine life. It is in you. But you're living asleep to it most of the time. Be led by the Spirit... and you will find joy and peace, patience and goodness."

"I've tried." Andy said. "I've tried to be good my whole life. I've worked hard. I took my kids to synagogue. I've..."

"Andy, I can tell you've tried. You've tried so hard that you've been your own worst enemy. In fact, I'd bet the harder you've tried, the more fake you've felt, or the more angry you were at home, am I right?"

"You know, I've never put that together before... but now that you mention it..."

“Look, Andy, all that striving... it’s like trying to push a rope. It doesn’t work very well. You’re life is tethered to God, but you can’t push a rope, or it just ends up a big knotted mess in your way. You can’t push the rope. You have to let the rope pull you.

“Stop being so driven, Andy, and allow yourself to be drawn.”

Paul’s words began to loosen something deep inside of Andy. He took a deep breath. And it loosened even more... and the more it loosened, the more the dark emptiness seem to have the faintest bit of light show up, like a star off in the distance beginning to appear that you can barely see.

“Stop being so driven,” Andy said to himself. “Let myself be drawn? OK, but I’m not sure I get what you’re saying or even how to do that.”.

And so, with a deeper kind of intensity, Paul began to say in the clearest way: **“You are not your temper, Andy. You are not your emptiness. You are not even the happy-go lucky image that you put on for friends.”** And as Paul began to say these things, his eyes lit up with a flame that took Andy by surprise.

“Andy, you have been made with the very Spirit of God. Be led by the Spirit... You don’t have to be controlled by your personality. You don’t have to follow a set script. Be led by the Spirit... and something new will begin to grow in you... something that looks like life and love... something that looks like gentleness and faithfulness with grow in you.”

“I want to believe you, Paul. In fact I’ve tried to be kind and patient my whole life. I’ve tried to be thankful and hopeful and sometimes I’m able to , Paul. I’ve really tried.”

“I’m sure you have,” Paul said gently to him. **“But you’re trying to do it on your own. You’re white knuckled, holding on to those things, trying to force them into your life... rather than letting go of your life and letting Life itself live through you.”**

It was at this point that Paul began to tell Andy about his rabbi, Jesus. And how Jesus lived surrendered to God, and part of that surrendering was trusting God even in death. But after Jesus was crucified, God’s life raised him from the dead.

“In a very real way,” Paul said, **“Jesus was filled with God’s life by dying to his own life. And I’m learning to do the same. I’m dying with Christ, so that I might be raised with Christ. So that Life itself can live through me. And it can live through you too, Andy.”**

Andy spent the next hour talking with this bald-headed stranger on the stone bench a block off the market. After saying goodbye, he took the long way home, walking

down the same dirt roads he had walked hundreds, if not thousands of times before. “Be guided by the Spirit,” he kept repeating. “Let Life live itself through me...”

He kept coming back to that all afternoon... even has he cleaned up the mess left over from his party. “Be led by the Spirit...”

That evening, at sundown, the Sabbath began. And so Andy went to synagogue like he always did. When he approached the door, he couldn’t believe what he heard. It was the voice of the stranger. He walked in and stood in the corner. There was Paul, sitting, teaching, and telling them about this person Jesus, the Christ.

Andy just smiled as he listened in the back of the crowd. It was the same thing he heard that morning on the bench from Paul. It’s the same thing he’s been wrestling with and thinking about all day.

But he still had so many questions. There was so much of what was being said he didn’t understand. He knew he needed more help, more guidance. So, after worship in the Synagogue, he went up to Paul and smiled.

“Any chance you still need a place to stay tonight? I have an extra room... and I could really use some help *wrapping my life* around what you’re saying.”

“Sounds great.” Paul said. **“Thanks for the offer.”**

And so they left together and talked some more. And not just that night. Paul is going to stay here for weeks... talking to Andy and to others... opening their eyes to the mystery of Christ... teaching them the deepest freedom that comes only when we allow ourselves to be tethered, to be attached to God.

Andronicus turned 57 last Thursday. For 57 years, he lived by a certain script... a script that seem almost handed to him... like he didn’t have a choice. He was stuck in the same patterns. He thought it was just who he was.

But the day after his birthday, his eyes... *began* to open ever so slightly. For the first time in his life, Andy had a glimpse of something more. He breathed in the Sprit of God and slowly began to see something like Divine Light living inside of him... wanting to live **through** him.

Fifty-seven years into his life, and **now**... Andy is beginning. Amen.

Reflection

*All of us who are human beings are in the image of God.
But to be in God’s likeness belongs only to those who by great love
have attached their freedom to God.*

Diadochus (5th Century)