

“Fruit of the Spirit”

A Homily Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Galatians 5:22-26

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Attentive readers of Scripture will remember that it was an exasperated Paul who wrote to the Galatians. While the NRSV has the apostle address them in Chapter 3 as “foolish” and N. T. Wright has rendered the original Greek as “witless,” I’ve always been drawn to the Jerusalem Bible translation, in which Paul calls his correspondents “stupid.”

Talk about pungent.

Talk about blunt.

Paul meant business, and he wanted the church in Galatia to turn away from false teachers and misguided modes of living, from abusing their freedom and indulging in petty arguments.

It’s that background we need to have to understand today’s passage. That and the preceding verses, 19 through 21. There Paul tells the Galatians, “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Master of various rhetorical techniques that he was, Paul employed the classic tool of comparing what was good with what was bad. But it is easy for us to focus on the laundry list of behaviors to the exclusion of all else in these passages—the licentiousness and strife, envy and carousing, and the love, joy and peace. We should also look at the images of the works of the flesh versus the fruit of the Spirit.

Did you notice the difference? It may seem trivial but it has huge implications. There are the works, *plural*, of the flesh against the fruit, *singular*, of the Spirit.

Now, as is often the case, the words of Paul are easily misconstrued. He was not drawing a stark division between flesh and spirit or indulging a Gnostic view of the universe, with a decayed body needing to be separated from a pure essence of being. No, he believed

that flesh and spirit are part of one whole, but that the flesh, to be made holy, must receive the Spirit and be infused with it.

Think back to Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. It transformed people, it saved people, it allowed them to be who God intended them to be. The Spirit had let them be free of this world's priorities and false imperatives. Instead of running a rat race, the followers of Jesus would walk his way.

Those who succumbed to the works of the flesh would lead lives of dissipation, engage in the fruitless pursuit of the meaningless, fight for the simple pleasure of opposing someone. They would be pulled in all sorts of directions, none of them wholesome, none of them leading to God.

And those who were open to the Spirit would receive its fruit. Look at the list of things Paul described: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It may not be obvious, but these are all forms of love, of caring for others, of caring for oneself, of being centered on God.

This is what the Christian is called to do. She is not intended to fight and argue, to suggest that she is better than someone else. Instead, she is called to be irenic, to be a source of charity.

Well, one might wonder, are these not traits any person might display? Why does one need to be a Christian?

Because, Paul would argue, we need God's help. These admirable, estimable behaviors flow from the Spirit, which, of course, with the Father and the Son, embodies them. Remember 1 John 4: God is love, and those who do not love do not know God.

And now you can see why these were the verses of Scripture around which we built this year's Children's Community Corner curriculum.

We try to teach our children certain things: about God, about Jesus, about the faith, but we also want them to learn how to lead a good life, a Christian life. They receive so many conflicting messages from the media and from marketers, from their friends and their online games. They need help in getting things right; frankly, so do we adults. That's why we should be ever grateful for the gift of the Spirit, which is with us even now, at this moment, in this place.

I quoted from Dickens a few weeks ago. Do you remember? If not, I won't be offended. Frankly, it's more important to recall what Jesus and Paul said than whomever I cited in a sermon.

Anyway, those words were the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." In some ways, that phrase describes our present moment. We struggle to rear our children in the modern world, with its racial tensions, dysfunctional

politics, coarse culture, and, just for good measure, a real, live pandemic. Yet amidst these troubles, we enjoy incredible wonders: the Internet, smartphones, medical miracles, space travel, and so much more.

We see the good and the bad, and we know Jesus and the Church that he made room for—that Paul taught and built, and that faithful women and men have loved—would want us to be aware of the many dangers and temptations in life and to be focused on the good and the beautiful.

“We should be the change we want to see” sounds a little trite, but it is true. We can be filled with love, joy, peace, and the like—or we can surrender to anger, dissolution, fear, and all that follows from them. We can acknowledge our limitations, and our need for the Holy Spirit, while giving thanks to God for, in the words of Psalm 139, having fearfully and wonderfully made us, each of us and all of us.

It is a joy to see our children, and I hope that they will have a long and fruitful relationship with the Christian Church, one that will encourage them to love and to serve, to be kind and curious, to know that while we may not have all the answers, we welcome their questions.

I have never been a fan of telling kids to sit quietly, to be invisible. They, just like each of us, is a fully formed person, known intimately by God. Over the years I’ve been pretty relaxed about children playing in the Sanctuary. That’s not because I have no respect for the space. It’s because I want boys and girls to associate this house of God with laughter and joy, not lectures and wagging fingers. What they see when they are five or thirteen will be with them throughout their lives and will shape their views of the Church. We cannot shield them from sadness or things going wrong, but there is no reason we should leave them with an experience of church in which God’s love is obscured by our own peculiar obsessions.

So, let us give free reign to the Spirit. Let us show and know love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let us encourage these in our children and hope for a world in which all people bask in the love of God and live in a society that is shaped and directed by that love.

That is what Paul wished for his church in Galatia so long ago. And that, I believe, is what he would wish for the Church in Lebanon and America.

It’s up to us, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

We know what to do, thanks to the example of Jesus.

It may be hard, it may take work, but I don’t think we are foolish, or witless, or stupid. Instead, we are the people of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.