

Sermon for Zion, January 13, 2019 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Hymns: 438 – When Morning Gilds; 389 - Breathe on Me, Breath of God;
The Fruit of the Spirit; May We, O Holy Spirit

Scripture: Galatians 5:22-23; John 15:1-4

Sermon Title: The Fruit of the Spirit (Series Introduction)

Galatians 5:13-26 - New Living Translation (NLT)

You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.

So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.

John 15:1-4 - Contemporary English Version (CEV)

Jesus said to his disciples: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit. But he trims every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed clean because of what I have said to you. Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me."

What's the best piece of fruit you've ever had in your life? That's a good question for a cold January day.

I vividly remember stopping at a roadside orchard in Tuscany, and eating a fig that had been plucked – still warm - from the tree moments before. It was so delicious, it brought tears to my eyes. Soft, juicy, sweet, tart; as unlike a Fig Newton as could be imagined. I proclaimed it the best thing I had ever eaten.

Maybe for you it's that apple picked fresh from the tree at MacPhee's Orchard in the fall. Or a Balderston strawberry, right from the field. Or gathering blueberries or raspberries, two for the basket, one for the mouth. Or that perfect peach!

Or maybe it is the unexpected fruit; many of you are old enough to remember the orange in your stocking at Christmas, and what a delight it was to savour that wonderful citrus in the midst of a bleak mid-winter, when most fruit was just a memory. I still get a jar of orange marmalade in my stocking, hearkening back to that tradition. Nowadays we get a Terry's Chocolate Orange too, but it just isn't the same.

Or maybe it's an unusual fruit that captured your attention. My brother recalls coming to Canada and seeing his first banana, which of course another child pointed at him and said "Bang." It took him a while to get over his banana phobia. I remember seeing my first kiwi. A fellow brought one in his lunch bag, and convinced us it was the abdomen of a tarantula. I'm still convinced they are.

Or maybe it is a piece of fruit from a tree or vine you yourself have nurtured and grown, and are now reaping the harvest of that careful and patient planting, pruning process. Friends in Penticton had an apricot orchard; as we walked through the trees, we were told the story of each one – which one had blossomed early, which had recovered from a drought, which one attracted all the bees. He carefully picked a couple apricots and gave them to us – of course, they were spectacular. "Come, help yourself anytime." We did, and ate apricots three times a day.

We humans are programmed to like fruit, to crave fruit, to need it. We need its vitamins, its nourishment. Deprive us of fruit, take away the Vitamin C we need, and we weaken, grow sick, even die. The right amount of fruit, and we thrive. Even the new Canada Food Guide, which is making surprising headlines, is recommending more fruit (More beans too, lots more beans, but not before church, please).

Why all this talk about fruit? Because we're going to spend the next number of Sundays talking about fruit – or more accurately, about what the Apostle Paul called “The Fruit of the Spirit.”

The “Fruit of the Spirit” passage comes near the end of a pretty difficult chapter in a letter Paul is writing to the newly-formed congregations in Galatia. Galatia, which comprises an area we would identify today as Central Turkey, was part of Paul's area of outreach, as he brought the Gospel from its base in Israel, and began to spread it West. The difficulties arose when Paul moved on and left these congregations he established on their own. Into the leadership vacuum came people with a different understanding of the Gospel, and, then as now, before you know it, there were divisions in the church.

Here's the root of the division in a nutshell. In Paul's world, more or less everyone believed in God or gods. Everyone. And everyone had a religious system to ensure they would be gaining their god's favour. Most people worshipped many gods, just in case, while the Jews, of course, were determined there was only One True God. Either way, you followed a given set of rules, practiced certain rituals, made sacrifices and offerings at the right time, and hopefully, your God or gods would rain blessings upon you. Or at least, not curses.

Then Jesus came along and said, “It isn't about religion. It isn't about rituals. It isn't about rules. It's about God – the one, the only, the true God – reaching out in love to the world, and us reaching back. In love – love for God, love for neighbour, love for the world. It isn't about religion, rituals, rules. It is about relationship. God's love for us, our love for God, our love for the world.”

Jesus demonstrated what it is to live that love through his own life, and through the sacrifice of his life, he showed the fullness and depth of God's love for us; that in order to break down the barriers we have erected between God and ourselves and others – barriers of selfishness, prejudice, cruelty, sin – in order to defeat all the evil of our world, the darkness within us all, Jesus gave his life for our sins. Through his resurrection, the power of death was broken, and forgiveness and life eternal were made available to all. As a gift. A gift of grace and love, received through faith.

That's the message Paul received from Jesus, and it is the message he brought to Galatia. But there were those who opposed this message, and those who distorted it. The opposition came from those Christians who said, “Yes, we believe everything

that Jesus said and did, but that does not mean we do away with the religious system of Judaism. In order to be a good Christian, you must be a good Jew, and follow all the traditional Jewish rules, regulations, rituals, and laws. God's love is a gift, yes, but a gift that must be earned through obedience." That was the opposition.

The distortion came from within. "If God loves us, if the gift of God is not dependent upon rules and regulations, if salvation is not earned by obedience, but by the free grace of God, we can do whatever we want. We can devote ourselves to the fulfillment of our desires. It is party time."

To counter this opposition, to correct this distortion, Paul writes this letter. We are not prisoners of rules, regulations, rituals. We are in relationship with God through Jesus Christ – a relationship of faith, of devotion, of love. Nor are we slaves to our desires, captives to the distorted values of our world – we are free to live in love; free to rise above a culture of more, more, more; free to seek the deeper things of life, to find true contentment and fulfillment by living in love of God and neighbour. And so Paul writes:

You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.

So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the ritual law.

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.

What Paul is offering here, is a trade. Our worst selves, for our best selves. The empty pursuits of the world, for the fulfillment of a life lived in the light of God's love. Temporary thrills, for eternal rewards. A life with all the miseries the world brings, for a life blessed by the Holy Spirit – a life characterised not by distorted values and impure desires, but by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These “Fruits of the Spirit,” as Paul calls them, are the natural outgrowth of a life lived with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. As we grow in Christ – as we grow closer in relationship with God through worship, study and service – the Holy Spirit, the presence and power of God within us, becomes more and more who we are; we begin to resemble, to inhabit, to express the characteristics of Jesus – characteristics we call the Fruit of the Spirit. Jesus used a gardening analogy too, when he said,

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit. But he trims every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit. Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me.”

God is the gardener of our lives, giving us the gift of life, providing all we need, overseeing all we do. Jesus is the vine, the rootstock to which, by faith in him, we are grafted; through whom we have a new identity, a new purpose; in whom we grow. The Holy Spirit is like the sap flowing from God, through Christ, into us, giving us strength to grow and thrive, until we bear the fruit we were created and in faith cultivated to produce, as day by day we grow to resemble the Vine; until, day by day, we resemble Christ, whose life was one of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Over these next weeks we are going to be spending some time in that orchard of faith, looking more closely at the Fruits of the Spirit, and how they can become more and more a part of who we are, as we become more and more a part of Christ.

When I look at my “best fruit ever” list, I can’t help but notice how the ones I loved the most were those closest to the source; plucked right from the branch, the bush, the vine. The closer to the source, the better, the most vibrant, the most alive; so with us, as we too grow closer to the source of all of life; as we grow closer to God, through Christ.

So, what’s your favourite fruit? Over the next weeks together, I pray your list will include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And maybe a fresh fig or two! Amen.

Our Theme Hymn: The Fruit of the Spirit (Carolyn Winfrey Gillette)

The fruit of the Spirit is love for our sharing,
It's joy in the gospel that we have from you.
It's peace that we live out with courage and daring;
It's patience, for we know that we have sinned, too.
It's kindness in all things and generous giving;
Its faithfulness seeking to follow your way.
It's gentleness, Lord, and it's self-controlled living;
Now make us more fruitful in these things, we pray.

Our Theme Prayer: May We, O Holy Spirit – (Paul Wigmore)

1 May we, O Holy Spirit, bear your fruit
your joy and peace pervade each word we say;
may love become of life the very root,
and grow more deep and strong with every day.
2 May patience stem the harmful word and deed,
and kindness seek the good among the wrong;
may goodness far beyond our lips proceed,
made real in word and deed as well as song.
3 May faithfulness endure, yet as we grow
may gentleness lend courage to the weak;
and in our self-restraint help us to know
the grace of Jesus whom we humbly seek.