

## **Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, January 20, 2019**

**Hymns:** 4 – Lord, as I wake I turn to you; 371 – Love Divine; The Fruit of the Spirit;  
695 – Although I speak with angel’s tongue

**Scripture:** Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 13

**Sermon Title:** The Fruit of the Spirit – “Love”

### **Galatians 5:22-23**

*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!*

### **1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 13**

*Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love never fails!*

*Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.*

We try to make our faith complicated. But it isn’t; it’s as simple as this:

*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

*“What is written in the Law?” Jesus replied. “How do you read it?”*

*He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

*“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”*  
(Luke 10:25-28)

Two things: that’s it. ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Two things.

The Bible takes these “two things,” and puts them right at the centre of its message, beginning to end. The “expert in the law” from the passage we just read was quoting from two of the oldest books in the Bible – Deuteronomy and Leviticus. As for the New Testament, the words “love” and “God” appear together over 75 times – verses speaking of God’s love for us, and our love for God. As for “love your neighbour,” Paul declared that the whole of the Law is fulfilled by obeying this one

command (Galatians 5:14). Peter implored his followers to “*above all, love each other deeply*” (1 Peter 4:8). And in John’s letters, he wrote that “*this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another*” (1 John 3:11). Jesus’ own brother James called the command to love your neighbour the “royal law” (James 2:8): “*If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right,*” he says.

So it isn’t surprising that when Paul makes his list of the Fruit of the Spirit – the characteristics of those who follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord, and who allow the Holy Spirit to take root in their lives, to bring them closer to the people they were created to be – it isn’t surprising that first on the list is Love.

In addition to worshipping and thanking God, learning just what it means to love God and to love our neighbour is the main reason why we come to church. If you’re wondering why you’re here this morning, let me sum it up in as simple and straightforward a way as possible:

- We’re here to learn about God’s love and to love God in return.
- We’re here to learn about Jesus and to love each other in the way he taught us.
- We’re here to grow in that love, and work together in sharing that love with the world.

That’s why we’re here. People (mostly ministers I suppose) try to make it more complicated than that, but it isn’t, really. It all boils down to loving God, loving each other, and sharing that love with the world.

Jesus came – was sent by God - to tell us and to show us how much God loves us. He was the very embodiment of God’s love. If you want to know what God is like, and what God’s love for us and for the world looks like, you take a look at Jesus, and what Jesus said and did.

Jesus came, too, to show us, to demonstrate what it is, to love God in return – with all our heart, mind, soul and strength; what it looks like to live a life with God as the focus, as the motivational and guiding force behind every relationship, every personal interaction, every priority we set, every decision we make.

Jesus also came to tell us and show us how to go about loving one another - how to respond to God’s gift of love by living in love and forgiveness, in worship-filled communities of compassionate care and service. If you want to know how to love

other people, and what love really means, you take a look at Jesus, and what Jesus said and did, and do the same; you practice, you grow that love right here.

Jesus also came to show us how to reach out from these communities of loving service, to share with all people the Good News of God's love in word and in deed, and to welcome all into the love, worship and compassionate service of God. If you want to know how to make a difference in the lives of others, how to make a difference in our world, you take a look at Jesus, and what Jesus said and did. And what those who followed him said and did. And then, inspired by God's love for you, by the example of Jesus, by the stories of those who followed him, and by the Holy Spirit working in and through you, you put that love into action. Not into storage – into action.

Sunday mornings, that's what we do. We celebrate God's love in Jesus Christ, we learn about what Jesus said and did, and we learn about and come up with ways to apply God's love and Jesus' teaching and example to our lives, to the lives of those within our family of faith, and to the lives of those in our extended family of the world. Or, to put it another way: We're here to love God; we're here to love each other; we're here to share that love with the world.

The Bible is of indispensable help, as it tells us the story of God's love for us and for the world. In the Old Testament, we learn about how God expressed his love through creation, and how God sought to share his love through a community of faith. God patiently instructed the people of Israel how to love God, how to care for creation, how to be a blessing to one another, and to all the world. Sometimes – or, to be honest, quite often – this Old Testament community of faith failed in loving one another and in being a blessing to the world. Like us, they complicated what's simple, they were easily distracted, their priorities were often all out of whack. Through their example, we learn, like they learned, that our love for God is far from perfect, our love for one another even less so, and we need all kinds of help from God if we're not going to screw our lives, each other, and our world, completely up.

So, to make things as clear as could be, God came to us in Jesus Christ. Gathering humble followers - common folk - teaching, loving and welcoming all, Jesus brought God's love and mercy, grace and forgiveness, welcome and salvation to all who would listen. It was a glorious moment in our world.

We read, in the Bible, what Jesus taught them – taught us - about God's love. Jesus said, *“For God loved the world **so much** that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life” (John 3:16)*

Don't miss those words: "so much." That's how God loves the world: "*so much.*" So much that he gave his only Son to save the world. To save us. That's how much. That's how God loves. God loves the world, God loves you, "so much."

About loving one another, Jesus taught us this (John 13:34-35): "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*"

Notice what Jesus didn't say: He didn't say, "Love those people you find particularly loveable." Nor did he say, "Love only those people who treat you lovingly first." On the contrary; Jesus said (Luke 6:32-33 NIV):

*"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that... But love even your enemies, do good to them... Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."*

Still not clear? Try this: Our love for one another – for all people - is to be a reflection of God's love for us, and of our love for God. We love God by loving one another.

That's how Jesus talked. That's how Jesus taught. That's how Jesus lived. And when those interested only in power and control couldn't stand it anymore, they had Jesus killed. Political reasons, personal reasons, religious reasons – whatever the motivation, Jesus didn't fit in their plan, Jesus stood somehow in their way, and they got rid of him. Or so they thought.

For three days later, God showed he wasn't finished with the world yet. Three days later, God showed that love and mercy, grace and forgiveness isn't so easily defeated. Three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus and God were, like Jesus said, "as one." Father and Son. Jesus was the power and presence, the love and grace of God embodied in human flesh. And, it turns out, despite all that evil can manage to throw at it, the power and presence, the love and grace of God, doesn't stay dead.

Jesus, alive again, energized his followers with hope, commanded them to share the Good News of God's love with all the world, and gave his followers the Holy Spirit to lead them, help them, inspire them, give them strength. And that presence and power of the Holy Spirit is with us to this very day, helping us love God, helping us love one another, helping us share that love with the world.

That's our job. With the help of the Holy Spirit, our job as the Church is to love God, to love each other, and to share that love with the world. To not only receive God's love, but to be God's love.

But what if we don't understand what love is? What if we think we maybe understand what love is, but really, we don't? If I were to ask you right now to turn to the person next to you and give them a concise, accurate definition of what love is, do you think you could do it? Do you think we'd all come up with the same answer? I don't think so. I think when it comes to love, real love, we've got a lot to learn.

Thankfully, the New Testament is very helpful in this regard. It contains not only the accounts of the life and words of Jesus we call the Gospels, but it also contains the stories of communities of faith like ours, and letters of instruction from those who knew Jesus to those communities when they, too, struggled to understand love, and to live that love out with one another and the world. Because to be honest, quite often this New Testament community of faith which we call "The Church" failed in loving one another and in sharing that love with the world. Through their example, like that of Israel in the Old Testament, we learn that our love for God is far from perfect, our love for one another even less so, and we need all kinds of help from God if we're not going to screw our lives, each other, and our world completely up. And we get help from letters like we read today, to that early church in Corinth, a pretty big and busy city not too far from Athens.

The Apostle Paul, writer of the letter, is frustrated with the Corinthians. Paul is frustrated with the church he labored so hard to establish, to set on the right path, to live in love of God, of one another, of the world. Trouble was, the Corinthians didn't understand love. Reading the letter, you realize that the Corinthians, much like many in our own time, much like many of us, have very confused ideas about love.

The Corinthians, like us, confused love with sex. If you don't think our society has confused love with sex, you haven't listened to a song on the radio in the last 50 years. Or watched TV. Or seen a movie. Or read a book. When Jesus is talking about love, he isn't talking about sex.

The Corinthians, like us, confused love with "like." "Do I love others? Yes, people I like. People who agree with me, and with everything I do and everything I say. Or who are wealthy. Or attractive. Or talented in a way I appreciate." That isn't love, it's "like." When Jesus is talking about love, he isn't talking about "like."

The Corinthians confused love with self-interest. Loving only those who can benefit you in some way – out of whom you get something, whether it is preferential

treatment, or acceptance of behaviour, or sex, or money, or time, or favour – well, that isn't love either. That's just being selfish.

They confused love with fun. Lots of times, we do have fun with the people we love, and that's great. Lots of times, though, love is more like hard work. If you've ever raised a child, and survived the experience, you know what I'm talking about. Sure, there's fun. But there's also late nights, and diapers, and runny noses, and sickness, and tantrums, and expense, and time, and the whole teenage thing. Not so much fun. Lots of hard work. But lots of love, too. But, like in a flawed understanding of marriage, the Corinthians figure, "If we're not having fun, that means we're not in love, so forget it."

In the midst of all that misunderstanding, Paul seeks to set the record straight. "Here's what love really is," he writes to them. And as he writes the words which God put in his heart, he writes to us, too, words which God now puts into ours:

*Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love will last forever!*

In order to love one another, and in order to share that love with all the world, the Corinthians needed to understand what kind of love Jesus was talking about. And so Paul taught them. And so they learned. And as they learned, and as the Holy Spirit started working in and through their lives, they began to bear the fruit of love, and be a blessing to one another and our world.

And that's why we're here. We're here to learn about God's love and to love God in return. We're here to learn about Jesus and to love each other in the way he taught us to love. We're here to grow in that love, and to work together in sharing that love with the world – to bear the fruit of love.

That's why we're here. That's why you're here. So this day, and every Sunday, let's worship God together. This day, and every Sunday, let's learn about Jesus together. This day, and every day, let's work on loving one another. And together, inspired and strengthened by the Holy Spirit working in and through us, let's bear the fruit of love, and share the blessings of love with the world.

Amen.