

The Fruits of the Spirit
Galatians 5:22-23
November 26, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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Our scripture this morning is about the fruits of the Spirit, so I have been thinking about the difference between gift baskets and harvest baskets of fruit. Have you ever received a fruit basket as a gift? This one has some navel oranges, Gala and Granny Smith apples, a pear, bananas, and a few lemons to fill it in since I couldn't find Clementines. Plus, the peppermint striped bows on top. I have received fruit baskets like this in the past, when I couldn't always afford citrus fruit in the winter, and I was really grateful to receive these gifts. In more recent years, I have also sent fruit baskets to family members when I couldn't be with them at Christmas. A fruit basket can be a lovely gift.

But it's a little different to eat fruit from a gift basket than from a harvest basket. Maybe you have an apple tree on your property. Or maybe you go to a pick-your-own apple orchard every October to get a big basket of your favorite variety of apples. Or perhaps you know a secret place on the lake to pick wild blueberries in summer. You paddle over there in your canoe when no one is watching, and you bring back basket after basket of those wonderful blueberries. Fruit that is locally grown and picked by your own hands just tastes better, doesn't it?

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This morning, we read St. Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul contrasts these virtues to the works of the flesh which, he says, are sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing, all of which were apparently rampant in the Galatian church. Remind me not to take a pastoral position there!

On the one hand, the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness.... On the other hand, the works of the flesh – jealousy, anger, quarrels, envy, drunkenness. If those are the choices, the answer is pretty obvious, isn't it?

I am especially interested this morning that Paul calls these wonderful virtues the "fruits" of the Spirit, and not the "gifts" of the Spirit. We do speak sometimes of spiritual gifts, but that is not Paul's terminology here. These virtues do not come in a gift basket from God. Rather, they ripen in us. How does that happen?

If I pray to God for patience, how do you think God is going to answer that prayer? Am I just going to wake up in the morning and suddenly be a more patient person? Is God going to plop a bunch of patience down on my head? I doubt that. I imagine that if I pray for patience, God is going to put me in uncomfortable situations, where I have to learn to be patient, no matter how impatient I feel. In answer to my prayer for patience, I will have the opportunity to grow patience in me the old-fashioned way.

Sometimes, these virtues, these fruits of the Spirit, grow in us simply because we are following the example of Jesus. He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If anyone abides in me and I in them, they will bear much fruit." Abide in me, and I will abide in you, Jesus said. When we abide in him, all our spiritual nourishment naturally comes through him. Then our harvest basket will be full to the brim, and our fruit will be sweet.

I have to say that I don't know very many people who are perfect examples of every one of the fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists. We are different individuals, with different strengths, with some virtues that come more easily to us and some that are more of a stretch. Which of these virtues come most easily to you?

So, I have some questions for you, but this isn't a test.

The first fruit of the Spirit is Love. The greatest of these is love, Paul says, in another letter to a different church. Does love come easily to you? Are you so sure that you are loved – by God, and by the people in your life – that love flows freely from you? Or perhaps love has not been kind to you in the past and you find it difficult to give your heart to others.

The second fruit is Joy. Not happiness or merriment. Not the fleeting sentiments we associate with the secular Christmas season, but deep joy that lasts. Is this the fruit you bear?

Peace. Are you filled with the peace of God that passes understanding? Or are you a fretter? Is peace the virtue that ripens in your life? Or is peace hard for you to come by these days?

Forbearance. I had to look this one up, so it is probably a virtue I need to develop. Forbearance is "patient restraint and tolerance." Some translations say simply "patience." I am not naturally a patient person. Are you? Is it easy for you to wait for something to happen in God's own time? Is God growing patience in you?

Kindness. I would say that the people in this congregation are some of the kindest folks I have ever known. Is kindness something that you learned early in life? Is kindness ripening in you? Or, in a difficult situation, do you have to stop and remind yourself to be kind?

Generosity. Is it easy for you to be open-hearted and open-handed? Has God planted generosity in your heart? Do you operate from an assumption of abundance in your life? Or do you respond from a position of scarcity, making generosity more difficult?

Faithfulness. This is not just having faith, but rather keeping faith with God and with the other people in our lives. Faithfulness is a discipline to be developed, I think, but maybe your experience is different. Where do you see faithfulness growing in your life?

Gentleness. When you touch another person with your hand, or with your words, or with your heart, is that touch gentle? Where did you learn that? Is gentleness ripening in you?

Now we come to the last fruit of the Spirit. If you are an impatient person like me, you have probably been saying to yourself, when will this list ever end? The final fruit is self-control. Do you find it easy to control your words and actions, or are you governed more by your passions and impulses? Is self-control the fruit you bear?

This basket of fruit will be waiting for you at the fellowship hour, which our children have rechristened the Gratitude Hour. This fruit is a gift from me to you. I hope you will enjoy a banana or a pear or an apple this morning. To receive fruit as a gift is lovely. But the fruits of the Spirit arrive in our lives in a harvest basket, not a gift basket with a bow on top. My basket doesn't have the same fruits in it as yours, and that is a good thing, because this church and this world need all of our different virtues.

Looking back over your life, do you see that these fruits of the Spirit are riper, more mature, than when you were younger? Our growing season is life=long, and God isn't finished with us yet! Isn't that wonderful? So, let us live in love and in joy and in peace as we are able. And let us abide in Jesus, the vine that nourishes our hearts, and wait with patience to see what fruits God is still calling forth in us, even now.

Amen