

“Set Free to Love”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 1:27-31

New Testament Lesson: Galatians: 5:19-26

This plant in the center of the Communion Table is from the window sill upstairs in my church office. I can't remember it blooming like this before (and I think I would if it had). So for some reason, this year was a particularly good year for my little Calindiva (Cal-in-dēva) plant.

No doubt, some of you know exactly why that is. I know we have some top-notch gardeners here. But I'm not one of them. The extent of my gardening is: Step 1) receive plant from friend; Step 2) put plant near window; Step 3) get someone to water plant; Step 4) enjoy plant.

Believe it or not, it works! No muss, no fuss. God is just that good as to create things that thrive effortlessly, given the right conditions, and, to include among those conditions, for me anyway, friends who don't mind watering plants. No muss, no fuss.

We, too, are made to thrive effortlessly, given the right conditions. And in fact, that's our biggest job as human beings – to establish and maintain the right conditions for life to thrive, for ourselves, for our families, and for people the world-over. “Be fruitful and multiply,” says God. And what do we say? We say, nah, we can do better than that. If we work hard enough, why, we can buy more stuff, make more things we like, load up on those things that we crave.

There's a difference between working for things and having good things. It's the difference the Apostle Paul talks about in today's New Testament reading, where he says, “The works of the flesh are obvious By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is ...,” and then he goes on to name it, which we'll come to later.

But for now, notice the difference between “works of the flesh” and “fruit of the spirit.” I mean, think about it. “Work” takes effort, whereas “fruit” just comes, given the right conditions.

And the greatest fruit of the Spirit is love. For freedom, says Paul, Christ has set us free – set free to love. That's the title of today's sermon, the second of three in a series titled Set Free to Live (last week), Set Free to Love (today), and Set Free to Be (next week).

Set free to love means that we don't have to work at love or any other aspect of the fruit of the Spirit that Paul lists, those being joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now you're going to tell me hey, wait a minute love takes work – and you're right, in one sense. Same with peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

In one sense, we have to work at peace and patience and all the rest. But in another sense, we don't. For instance, there's one that I left out just know; I didn't list it – joy. We don't have to work at joy, do we? We either have it or we don't.

But to have it, we have to be open to it, open to joy, which means setting aside those things that get in the way. Likewise, if we want to be more loving, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, or have more self-control, then we have to set aside those things that get in the way, we have to reprioritize our lives, change the way we respond.

Take for instance the guy whose car stalled in heavy traffic one day, just as the light was turning green. Frantically, he tried to restart the car, and the longer it took the more honking he heard behind him. This, of course, just made matters worse. Finally, he got out of the car and walked back to the first driver behind him. But instead of letting anger get the better of him, he decided to try for a little joy. He said, "I'm sorry," "but I can't seem to get my car started. But if you'll go up there and give it a try, I'll stay back here and honk your horn for you." That guy knew the other driver was upset. And somehow he had the presence of mind to try to lighten the mood, to bring a smile to at least one other face.

When we put the other person's interests ahead of our own, it's easier to be more loving, joyous, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, and gentle. It's easier to have more self-control if we live by a higher standard, hold ourselves to a higher ideal, such as being a better follower of Christ.

So why is it that our lives are not overflowing with the fruit of the Spirit, like this basket is overflowing with the fruit of the earth? Well, do you think this fruit just grew itself? Why, yes, in one sense it did. But what would have happened if the farmer had thrown rocks down on top of the seeds instead of soil? Plants need good soil to grow.

What would have happened if the farmer had planted the seeds indoors where there's no sunlight, or in the desert where there's no water? It takes the right conditions for fruit to grow, AND not much else.

My little plant on the communion table has its flowers all pointed in the same direction, in the direction of the light coming through my window upstairs. This plant wasn't going to let anything get in the way of its light.

And neither should we. The fruit of the Spirit is just waiting to arise among us and within us as long as we don't let anything get in the way of it blossoming, and growing. That's why Paul gives us examples of the rocks and darkness and drought that get in the way of us experiencing and enjoying the fruit of the Spirit. He calls these the "works of the flesh" – fornication getting in the way of love, impurity diluting/watering down our sense of joy, licentiousness (which means

wanting what we want when we want it) upsetting our sense of peace, patience giving way to idolatry when we feel like God's not moving fast enough, enmities (or hostilities) crowding out kindness, strife and struggle vs. generosity, jealousy vs. faithfulness, anger vs. gentleness, and quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing all because of a lack of self-control.

"I am warning you," says Paul, "as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Two warnings, constant vigilance, the help of a faithful Christian like Paul. We need these things to keep us from living among the rocks, in the darkness of a Godless, dry and dusty existence.

No one is immune from this. Everyone needs God's word, we all need to listen to the Spirit, we all face the danger of going in the wrong direction. We all have a choice to make in life. We can either move away from God in our words and actions, or we can move toward God by aligning ourselves with the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As hard as it is for us to always be aligned with the Spirit of God – and the more complicated our world becomes the harder it gets – but as hard as it is, at least the choice is clear. "... The works of the flesh are obvious," says Paul. We don't have to guess about that.

If you find yourself working hard at loving the people in your life, look at what it is that's getting in the way – jealousy, hostility, anger, or just plain itchin' for a fight – quarrelsomeness.

If you don't have joy, peace, or patience, take a step back. Look to see if there's something you're doing to muddy things up. Are you making demands the world just wasn't designed to fulfill. Are you clinging to unreasonable expectations of yourself or others? We all do.

But none of us needs to live that way. We can focus, instead, on our faith. "Lead me not into temptation, but delivery me from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the gory, forever.

Simple isn't it? Simple to understand, yet so hard to live by. But we can do it, each of us. We can live a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And all it takes is looking, when life's not that, looking at what's getting in the way, and then letting that go, setting ourselves free to love, setting ourselves free to live by the fruit of the Spirit.

There's lots of fruit up here – both stickers and edible fruit. I invite you to come up and take whatever fruit you want, whatever fruit would feed your life. Take that with you as a reminder of that fruit of the fruit of the spirit that could be greater in life.

Pastoral Prayer

God, today we simply come in gratitude. We pause to thank you for your provision, your care.

We do not take for granted the gift of home and food.

We are so grateful for the love of family and community.

We are thankful for this beautiful place to gather in your name, for here we are challenged, encouraged and reminded of who you are and what you have done for us.

We pray for those in need of a special measure of your blessing today.

We have been blessed with the fruit of your Spirit. We are thankful for the love, patience, kindness and gentleness of your Spirit.

Continue your transforming work through which we who have been loved will love; we with whom you have been patient will show patience; we to whom kindness has been shown will be kind; and we with whom you have been gentle will be gentle ourselves with all people.

For all of this and more, we give you thanks in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**