

Day One

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Galatians 5:22-23)

There is a word for a person who obsessively loves words, it is logomaniac. The fact that I am offering that, might put me in the camp with other logomaniacs. Paul, whose letters comprise almost half of the New Testament, had a fondness for words. I image Paul was passionate about prose and persuading people toward a purpose. The above two verses from the letter to the Galatians, Paul sets out to coax and convince the people of God to plant themselves in a particular place. He invites us to root our lives in a way of being that can nourish and nurture us. In the past, I think I have skimmed and surfed the surface of these words. I have taken the list as nice ideas rather than each word as a serious spiritual practice. Paul isn't just giving us a list of qualities that we can share or show when we are at church, or with people we agree with, or even when we feel like. Paul is suggesting and saying that to claim the identity of Christian will place before us a way of life.

This list both compels and challenges me. I want us to hold them up to the light of our lives and this world we inhabit right now. What does love look like in a world of social distancing because of a virus? What does love say or do in a world where we do not treat all people as God's beloved? The question is both, how might you or I embrace and embody these words individually and how do we let this word define us collectively?

First, I invite you to look over this list of words. Which one leaps off the screen and lands in your lap? Second, hold each of the words for a few moments. In the coming days, you will be invited to define the word for such a time as this. We will examine and explore definitions and quotations that might give shape to how we would practice each word. Third, you may want to take time to write your own definitions or illustrations or stories or paint each word on a canvas or compose a poem or let each word sit alongside you to see what it might have to say in these days.

To be clear, Paul was not writing in some Pollyanna perfect utopia. The church in Galatia had problems. There was division and disagreement. The question of whether following Christ meant you had to convert to Judaism hovered and hung in the air. While that question may not be our question, we know what it is like to be pulled in different directions of debates. Rather than letting diet or circumcision or certain prayers be the soil in which your soul is rooted, Paul is proposing another way. Remember, the wider backdrop to the communal tension is that Rome had its demands and decrees as well. Paul is writing to a people stressed and strained and unsure of what to do. Sound familiar?

This list is not just a nice Sunday School type invitation. It is the root system designed to feed and fuel the faith of us to follow Jesus. It is meant to influence and impact how we act and what we say all the time. Pick up the nine words Paul lists above one-by-one. Hold them. Listen and lean into them. And may these reflections help us not escape from but engage the world as we know it right now.

Prayer: God who crafts and creates with words, let this list of Paul find a place in our hearts and find fresh expression in our lives. Amen.

Day Two

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Quotes to ponder prayerfully:

“Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” James Baldwin

“Love is the strongest force the world possesses and yet it is the humblest imaginable.” Gandhi

“Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.” Maya Angelou

“Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.” Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Love can quickly fall into sugary-sweet sentimentalism or be easily dismissed as an ideal that just doesn't work in a world so broken. Love is great for a book or movie or pop song on the radio to escape reality. But let's face it, power too often tramples on love because we see love as passive or permissive of all things. But look at the above quotes. In each, we hear that love is a verb that protests and protects the sacredness of all. Love demands that we let down our guard to ourselves and others. Baldwin's quote is so prophetically powerful to call to notice the masks we wear and force others to wear. Love is a long look at the raw reality, not with rose-colored glasses, but creatively seeing the possibility, potential, promise even in the chaos.

Love can be a force to be reckoned with, but we quickly abandon this path at the first sign of difficulty or criticism. Instead, we end up worshiping at the altars of money or

fame or political point scoring. We re-tweet that which dehumanizes others rather than that which affirms and acknowledges the holiness within all humanity/creation. So often it can seem like the only plot line is “us verses them.” What if, there is no “them”? How would we define and distinguish your life if not against something or someone? How do we shape a life not be debating but dialogue and understanding? In a word, love.

Love will walk through the difficulty of these days. Love will release when other forces want to confine and contain. Love will lift every voice when other forces want to silence those who disagree. Love will embrace, while other forces want to keep sowing seeds of hate and hurt into the world.

Paul starts with love because that is who God is. Paul starts with love because it is the foundation for the formation of the human heart. You would not be except for the love of those who first held you/nurtured you/watched you grow. You would not thrive if not for the love that walked beside you. Or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Without love, I am nothing.” And he doesn’t mean the love of marriage. He means the love of family, friends, people who care about us when the Coronavirus is pulling at us. The love of people who sit with us and stay in the pain of naming the racism. The love of people who keep on gathering to listen to the laments, people who zoom with you and call you and drop off a lasagna is a socially distance, safe way. Love is active force that has kept humanity going and growing for centuries. It is we who have weakened love because it seems to move much slower than pounding our fists. It is we who have weakened love by tossing it around too much. It is we who have weakened love by chasing after money or power or stuff ~ which is to say the gold calves we still create today (see Exodus 32).

If God is love and love is God; and we are created in God’s image; then we are called to let this force feed and fuel our whole lives, every day, to practice this art until it is seen not as something for some far off future, but as the only way that can truly save us.

Prayer: God who crafts, creates, and loves us into being, let Your presence guide me and ground me every second today and for a thousand days to come. Amen.

Day Three

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Quotes on Joy

“Joy doesn’t simply happen to us. We choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”
Henri Nouwen

“To get the full value of joy, you must have someone to divide it with.” Mark Twain

“A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love. She gives most who gives with joy.” Mother Teresa

“It takes courage to open ourselves up to joy.” Brene Brown

So often joy is conflated, collapsed, into another word, “happiness”. We see the two as synonyms and substitute both in conversation. Yet, for me, happiness is fleeting and fading, it comes and goes. Happiness is a feeling. Joy is different. Joy is a virtue on which we can build our lives. Joy is a choice. It doesn’t always feel that way.

We think there are factors outside our control that are pulling the levers over whether we are joyful. We let our joy become dependent upon the reality outside of us, rather than what is happening within us. We give up our right to choose joy by postponing it to: when there is a vaccine and I can go on vacation. Or, we finally live the truth that all people are created equal. Or, when we finally have enough – see ourselves as enough – feel satisfied. While those would all be joy-filled moments, the point is that joy is internal reality rather than an external happenstance.

Joy is what can feed and fuel our lives. But we can let brokenness be the only members of the jury deciding whether we feel joyful. If we let the news today or whether something happens the way we want or becoming our idealized self be what brings joy, we will miss that as the spiritual says, “Joy comes in the morning.” Joy is awoken every day, with every breath. Joy is the constant, but we let it become covered over. This is not to suggest or say our problems we face don’t perplex and vex us. They do. The problems of the virus, racism, discrimination in all forms, economic realities that will take years to address, people dying, political polarization, and just trying to decide what to do, feels like enough evidence to say, “Joy will have to wait.” But until when?

Remember, Paul is writing to people who were confused and hurting. Paul is writing to a people divided and distraught. To suggest joy as a way of life seems counter-intuitive. Yet, I believe Jesus laughed. He laughed when he took the children into his arms. He laughed when the woman washing his feet tickled his toes. He laughed at

Zacchaeus' tree climbing to get a better view. He laughed with his disciples at their daily committee meetings. Laughter and joy are a central to life as breath. In fact, without joy, life is pretty bleak. I get why people rush and race out to get back to normal, because being confined in homes seems to have stripped us of joy. Oh sure, for a week or two, we found joy in doing things around the house or in binge watching Netflix. But four months later?!? Where is the joy in the same colored walls or in the fear that sits in your throat when you venture out? I agree with Brene Brown, it takes courage to be open to joy, especially right now. It seems out-of-bounds with reality. I want to hold the both/and world where joy sits alongside our fear talking through where both have a place. I want to hold the both/and world where joy can be found in the simplicity of now rather than in the fast-paced frenzy of life five months ago. I want to hold the both/and world where joy is simply being right where you are. Because if joy is here...joy can be anywhere...we only have to practice the art of discovery.

Prayer: Joy-sowing God, plant and water and help me harvest this seed in my life I pray today and this week. Amen.

Day Four

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Peace is silence.

Peace is laughing so loud and hard you side aches.

Peace is a breeze that refreshes.

Peace is a friend's voice on the other end of the phone you were just about to call.

Peace is a sensation down your spine, from the top of your head to your pinkie toe.

Peace is a blade of grass that grows.

Peace is a bird climbing a tree while at the next tree two squirrels play.

Peace is sharing what is in your heart.

Peace is...(fill in your words)

Peace is a world where all people are seen, treated, and live as God's beloved.

Peace is a country where we are able to talk about what matters most without degrading or demonizing the other.

Peace is a community where all have shelter, food, and our children can grow.

Peace is a home where we are allowed to make mistakes and experience forgiveness.

Peace is what comes when love is the foundation and joy fuels/feeds the soul.

Peace happens in our heart, is woven into the walls, and is set loose on an unexpected world.

Peace is...(fill in your words)

Peace happens.

Peace awakens.

Peace grows.

Peace like a river attends my soul, calls me abroad, and takes me on an adventure.

Peace calls for companions who will go alongside for the ride.

Peace is what connects me to the caterpillar, my neighbor, my hope for what might be.

Peace is....(fill in your words).

Prayer: Shalom-dreaming God, who prayerfully works for the well-being/thriving of all, create in me a peaceful heart and life. Now, O God, fill in your words....

Amen.

Day Five

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Pause.

Stop.

Reflect.

Over the last few days, I have given you lots of words inspired by these ancient words of Paul. I pray that my words have helped you find your own words and thoughts and meanings. After all, the point isn't for you to agree with me, the point is for something new to be brought forth. The prayer is that the seeds of these fruits are planted in the soil of our souls and begin to germinate.

So, where did you live love this last week? Where did you share love and encounter love unexpectedly this week?

Where did joy serendipitous stir within you, feeding and fueling you?

When did peace pay a visit to your soul and in your conversation with a friend?

Pause.
Stop.
Reflect.

What have you learned about love that is particular at this point in history?
What do you need to still discover about joy?
Where do you most long for peace to position its message and meaning in your life?
How about in our world?

Pause.
Stop.
Reflect.

Let these questions sit with you. Let these questions cause new ones to be asked. Let these questions continue to accompany you in these days.

Prayer: Loving, joy-giving, peace-sowing God, let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our minds be connected creatively to You as we live out these days.
Amen.