

Reflections on Galatians 5, week 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)

We embark on our third week of letting these fruits of the spirit stir and steer our lives in such a time as this. We begin with an invitation for both my right and left-brain brothers and sisters.

For those who live life with artistic flair – I am wondering what ways these words might find creative expression from your heart and hands collaborating? What imagines could you paint or draw after reading the above verse? Is there a poem that is longing to be set let loose in the world in response to this list of nine words? What kind of creative response has been sitting patiently on the shelf of your soul to be shared with others?

For those who love the structure of a spreadsheets, could you craft and create a chart where each of the nine words are given a row with definitions? Or each row could contain a concrete expression of how you long to embody these words. I picture the beautiful structure of columns with words about the joy of laughing over zoom with a friend or you looking into the eyes of the grocery clerk to thank her for all she is doing in these days. Or is there some other way you could begin to give voice to your thoughts in your heart through the wonderful organization you share with the world?

I am praying we might share examples of these fruits from our lives with each other here on Facebook. For me, I am moved by the progression of Paul's love of lists. I find an intentionality in the order. Love is the firm foundation on which Paul begins. Love is the root system that sinks deep into the soil to soak in the nutrients needed to feed/fuel the other eight. Love and joy are connected in amazing ways. Rarely have I found joy swirling in my life without love close by, and vice versa. When love and joy are throwing a party in my life, peace always stops by to join in with us.

The next three about patience and kindness and generosity also seem to be connected to the same branch. When I get impatient, I get irritable and ignore my connections to others. When I get frustrated, it flows from me in ways that I am not proud of and closes my soul to others. I am aware of how these three also are ways God moves in our midst. Patience doesn't come naturally to me; it is always a gift from God. Kindness is a kind of fuel that re-generates itself moment-by-moment. The more I find myself in a state of being present and open, the more that longs to be shared with others.

As we dive and dwell in the final set of three words this week, I pray you will find God's presence continuing to awaken your heart in new ways. I pray you will write new poems and create wonderful charts for the sake of the world today. Let the fruits of the spirit feed and fuel your life this week.

Prayer: Creative and collaborating God, call us to sink the roots of our lives deep into Your love, that by doing so, we might be Your people in such a time as this. Amen.

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When I hear the word, “faithfulness,” suddenly a soundtrack in my mind starts to play the words of the hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.”

“Great is Thy faithfulness,” O God Creator,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.
“Great is Thy faithfulness!” “Great is Thy faithfulness!”
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
“Great is Thy faithfulness,” Lord, unto me!

Written in 1923 (almost 100 years ago), these words speak and sing to me right now. I am particularly taken by the power of the refrain, “Morning by morning new mercies I see;” To be sure, I don’t always notice the new mercies among the headlines as I sip my coffee, The stories of mercy must be hidden somewhere at the very bottom, on the last page of section C of the newspaper. Perhaps the new mercies won’t come from what we can rationally or reasonably recognize. Perhaps the new mercies are always a surprise of the sacred swirling. Perhaps the new mercies are the moments of calm where we can watch the first light of the sun softly touch the green grass causing the dew to evaporate. How does that first light of sun help you let go of what is weighing you down this morning?

The writer of Hebrews 11 who says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Maybe what we see isn’t only through our eyes, but a way of seeing deeper in our souls. Often assurances are not based on an insurance or insistence or a money-back guarantee. Assurances are swells of the spirit that help us keep on keeping on. Assurances are the moments a friend listens to our lament rather than rush us toward feeling better. Assurances comes when someone helps us right when we needed it. Assurances are the traces of God's grace in our life that too often can get lost amid the shuffle or buried under the bad news which stirs around us.

The great faithfulness isn’t always the best or brightest or boldest moments. The great faithfulness is that God woke us, got us up, and pulled a chair right up beside us. Maybe faithfulness isn’t something we can ever possess but possesses us. It is a gift of God’s love. The persistent, patient, loving parent who calls to us softly and tenderly. I pray I might listen well today.

Prayer: Stir in my midst this morning, O God, with a patient, kind, generous faithfulness opening me to the new mercies of Your presence. Amen.

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Gentleness is not a word that I would use to describe what often I feel stirring within me right now. Gentleness is not a place I find myself residing. Gentleness is not easy when you find yourself restless. The interior of our lives is shown in the exterior of our words and actions. When the insides of my soul look like a tangled, twist set of Christmas lights; when the chaos churns in my soul, it is difficult to enter with a calmness or gentleness. Too often gentleness is conflated with meekness. Gentleness can come across as permissiveness or even a doormat to others.

I am reminded of what Zen Buddhist Roshi Joan Halifax wrote, “All too often our so-called strength comes from fear not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that’s flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that’s soft and open, representing choiceless compassion. The place in your body where these two meet — strong back and soft front — is the brave, tender ground in which to root our caring deeply.

How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft front compassion, moving past fear into a place of genuine tenderness? I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly — and letting the world see into us.”

A strong back and a soft front.

A strong back to know where I stand, but a soft front to realize God isn’t finished with me yet. A strong back to stand up to discrimination in all its forms, not with belittle the other but in a way that allows for both our growths.

A strong back to keep learning, keep growing, keep reaching toward the realm of God; and a soft front that realizes often this doesn’t happen instantly or immediately or only by my own actions.

A strong back rooted in God; a soft front ready for the spirit leading me to vulnerable places.

Gentleness need not be meekness. Gentleness is a the tenor and tone of the words and our very presence. I know well that sometimes my presence is sharp as a knife when I cross my arms and let frustration saturate every word I say. I know well my sarcasm can be biting and bitter. I know well how I can try to project, pretend to be strong, but inside am as fearful as any other animal on earth.

Gentleness cuts through our defensiveness and denial of our vulnerability. Gentleness says there is another way to live. Gentleness could be one of the most important fruits of the spirit needed and necessary right now. Gentleness has room for me to recognize that I am in the image of God...and so are you. That there is space on the shelf of life for both of us, we don’t have to compete and compare, but can co-exist. May it be so today and for countless days to come.

Prayer: May the gentleness of Your grace, O God, consume and control my words, my actions, my very presence in how I respond to the face in the mirror and the face I turn toward the world today. Amen.

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One of our children, who will remain nameless, was a bit of a handful as a toddler. Do you know those plastic locks you put on kitchen doors to keep toddler's hands away from pots and pans and potentially dangerous chemicals? In a time that rivaled Houdini, our child figured out how to get past those; even as I could not!! Climbing up on the couch to jump off time and time again? That was just a normal Tuesday. The energy that surged and swirled within our child meant perpetual motion. At the time, the days were long. Now, that I have two teenagers, I longingly look back.

Early on in the education system, teachers questioned our child's ability to self-control. There is a tension between saying everyone is beautifully and uniquely created in God's image with the desire to have people conform to some standard that was agreed upon at a meeting most of us were never invited to attend. To be sure, there needs to be rules and consequences. The line between helping people control for the good of all and controlling people is difficult to define. One person's out of control behavior is another person's free expression. One person's misbehavior is another person's misunderstood actions. One person's desire for everyone to fall into line is another person's manipulation. We struggle so mightily with the boundaries of freedom.

There is an irony in that because the word, freedom, would imply anything goes. But if I hurt and harm you, that impedes your freedom to simply be. If I prop up policies that perpetuate your ability to vote, get a job, own a home, and love who you love; then you are not free – nor am I. Freedom is not just individual, it is collective. Like the butterfly wings that impact the weather, so my actions and words send ripple effects that can either cause flourishing or faltering. We are interconnected.

I wonder if it was intentional to end with self-control? Surely, tending the other eight fruits of the spirit will take our self-control. Surely, for these fruits to grow in you and in me, we need to make sure that all have access to the resources and that no one is opportunity hoarding or clinging or controlling. Perhaps as adults we are more like my child than we care to admit. We want what is ours now! We want our freedom, even if it tramples on another. We live by the motto, "Get yours while the getting is good." And yet, such a way of life is hurting others and devastating our earth. Self-control might be a fruit that could have save ourselves, others, and our world.

What is your response, reaction to the word? Do you bristle? Do you want to hold this word at arm's length? Do you think Paul should have just stopped at eight fruits of the Spirit? In other places of Paul's letters he is clear that if I cause one of my brothers or sisters to stumble, I need to help that person. Who is my sister and brother's keeper? Me! My responsibility is to let the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness grow in me and you. That will take self-control. That will take leaning into the strength of the spirit. That needs to continue to grow in me so that we might grow together. These fruits, to return to Rev. Thurman's words from a few weeks ago, remain our growing edge. The question is, are we willing to go to that edge?

Prayer: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the living God, continue to cause these fruits to find expression in my life every hour and every day. Amen.

We have reached the end of diving into and dwelling with each of the nine fruits of the Spirit. I pray the meditations over the last three weeks have helped awaken new thoughts. I pray you have found ways to be awoken to God's presence and provoked new ways of living. I pray You have felt surrounded and sustained every day.

I once heard that the first three gifts of the spirit (love, joy, and peace) have to do with gifts from God; the second three (patience, kindness, and generosity) have to do with gifts we can give to each other; and the final three have to do with gifts we give to ourselves (faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). In some ways I like the symmetry and structure of that thought. I appreciate that ordering and way of thinking.

At the same times, I realize all nine are inter-related, tangled and twisted together. For me the invitation is to collaborate with God in finding creative ways to mix and mingle these gifts together. Like weaving threads together, patience and self-control can be pair in beautiful ways. Generosity and love often need to hold hands. Gentleness and joy can bring out the best in each other. Both individually and collective these nine words continue to call me back to the holy hovering in my life and remind me of the way I want to live.

Holy One hold today the light of life in your hands.
Holy One guide and ground the actions of my life with Your presence.
Holy One lead and let loose my words with Your love.

I realize how quickly days can stack on days.
I realize that one moment can be at once both ordinary and holy.
I realize that in the midst of change and chaos, there is little I can control.

I long be a conduit of compassion and care.
I deeply desire to be so intertwined with You that our wills are one.
I prayerfully seek You.

And then...
Life interrupts and intrudes in ways that can make these prayerful moments seem as distant as Pluto.
I forget love in the face of frustration.
The priority of prayer is pushed aside for something that seems more important at the time.
People arrive with brokenness that can hurt and harm.
Or as the Apostle Paul said, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Complicated, complex, convoluted and confusing, life can be.
Beautiful, blessed, bewildering, and beholding, life can also be.
Sometimes wrapped in wonder, love and praise, it is both.

So, take my life and let it be, fully steeped in Your marvelous mystery.
Take this moment and this day, let me be caught up in prayer and praise.
For You are the One who names and claims my life,

Let that truth fully take hold through all the joy and strife.
May the light of Your love, the trace of Your grace,
Be now my vision, with every person and place.

Amen.

Alleluia.

Amen.