### “The Fruit of the Spirit” Steve Finlan for The First Church, June 26, 2022

**Galatians 5:1, 13–17, 22–25**

1For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . .

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other . . .

22The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

**Luke 9:51–56**

51When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. 54When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” 55But he turned and rebuked them. 56Then they went on to another village.

Welcome to Sunday service at the First Church. We are happy to be with you today so that we may be renewed, inspired to grow in understanding, and share with each other.

Last week I looked at the story of Saul who was chosen by Jesus, started calling himself Paul, founded a number of churches, and wrote letters to them. This passage in his letter to the Galatians begins by addressing freedom. We are called to freedom, but we must be responsible. We must recognize the love command. If we fight in our congregations, we are hurting each other.

He goes on to say that there is a severe conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. Let me ask the men in the congregation. Have you ever asked for help to “crucify the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24)? Not me! To restrain them, but not to crucify them! But that is what Paul set out to do. It’s based on the deeply held belief that “what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh” (Gal 5:17). I don’t really see that in Jesus’ teachings. There is a tendency, in Jesus, to enjoy a good meal with wine and friends. There is no guilt trip about it possibly being in conflict with what the Spirit desires. Nor is there any worry that a celebration will lead to debauchery.

I think Paul simply has a different instinct from Jesus, on this subject. Paul is convinced that one must be an ascetic, one who renounces pleasures, in order to be properly focused, spiritually. This was an attitude hard to find among the Jews. I don’t see it in Jesus or his immediate disciples. But some members of Jewish sects were practicing asceticism, and it becomes a common attitude in the Christian church from Paul’s time onward.

Paul has some important ethical teachings in this section of Galatians. He wants responsibility and love within the congregation, and he warns them “if . . . you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal 5:15). He puts forward positive teachings as well: “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16). Then there is his famous list: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22–23).

Some of these spirit-fruits have to do with relationship to God, some to relationship to other people, and some to do with self-poise and inward truth-discernment. Relationship to God is involved in faithfulness. Relationship to others is seen in love, patience, kindness, generosity, and gentleness. And self-poise is involved in joy, peace, and self-control. Five of the nine fruits have to do with relating to others, three with relating to oneself, and one with relating to God, although, really, all nine are the gift of God and depend upon one maintaining the connection with God. “Live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (5:25) sums up the teaching. From the Spirit spring the waters of truth, peace, and joy.

In the Gospel passage, two other apostles, James and John, are not particularly Spirit-driven when they ask Jesus if they can call down fire upon some Samaritans who are not very receptive to their teaching. Of course, this is quite contrary to the whole spirit of Jesus’ teaching, and they earn a rebuke for this. How is it that important people like James and John, the third and fourth disciples chosen by Jesus, could be so spiritually dense? But isn’t it true that we can be dense, too, and that we often see ourselves in the actions of the disciples?

It happens all the time, that even people who want to do God’s will slip up and show a crude or cruel or materialistic side. These brothers were often impetuous, and Jesus nicknamed them “the sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). Here they impetuously express a vengeful attitude. Religious people can sometimes give in to feelings of superiority and emotions of revenge against those who are not receptive to their message. It is an immature phase, and needs to be outgrown. It goes right against some of the essential fruits of the Spirit, such as love, patience, kindness, and generosity, while the very act of expressing the thoughtless suggestion shows a lack of gentleness and self-control.

Are we like James and John, sometimes receptive to Jesus and sometimes prone to savage emotions and attitudes? Probably we are, at least to some degree. Whenever we find ourselves falling into the latter, we need to stop and pray, asking God to take our emotions in hand and help us to practice self-control, while we await a spiritual transformation that will make us less susceptible to such emotions.

We can’t change ourselves simply by an act of will, but we can use our will to rededicate ourselves to doing God’s will and seeking Jesus’ help in doing so. I hope James and John recognized their error, and sought to pray for better spiritual self-control.

John later becomes the apostle of love, but it probably didn’t just come naturally, for him. He didn’t love the Samaritans whom he was ready to burn to a crisp. He had to *practice* getting more spiritually receptive, living by the teachings, and being open to transformation of his heart. He was able to remember the words of Jesus about the waters he gives welling up in one’s heart like a spring of water, and living water flowing out of the believer’s heart (John 4:14; 7:38). He conveyed Jesus’ instruction that we are to love one another, the way he loved us (13:34; 15:12). And he remembered Jesus saying “go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16). I am guessing that these teachings sank in, and that John started to manifest the fruit of the Spirit in his life. As an old man, he told his congregation “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

This John began as a somewhat hot-headed Jewish nationalist. After four years with Jesus, and then seventy years with the Spirit of Truth after Pentecost, he became a mellow and loving old man. I hope to mellow out in another thirty years.

Let us be students in the school of love, growing in love and the fruit of the Spirit, practicing patience, gentleness, kindness, generosity, and self-control. Each day is a gift to us, an opportunity to discern the better choice and to allow the Spirit to guide us. When we manifest the fruits of the Spirit, we are showing spiritual poise, based on confidence in God’s good will and guidance. We can live by the Spirit, and it will well up within us, ready to overflow. Let us renew daily our resolution to grow in spiritual love and to share what has been given to us. They will know us by our love.