Sermon Series: Fruit of the Spirit

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Nebraska Synod of the ELCA

“Self-Control”

**Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

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

13For 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, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

**22By contrast, the 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 6:1-12**

1One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. 2But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" 3Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" 5Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."  
6On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. 7The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. 8Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. 9Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" 10After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. 11But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.  
12Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.

Here in Nebraska, we live in a seed-planting state. The statue on top of the state capital is the image of a sower sowing seeds. In Nebraska, we plant seeds that grow into corn, wheat, soybeans, and even sunflowers. We’re also the home of Arbor Day so we plant trees of all kinds, including fruit trees.

Have you ever had a fruit tree in your yard or nearby? Or, perhaps you’ve visited an orchard in the fall to pick apples or get fresh cider?

We had a cherry tree in our yard when I was growing up. I remember watching through the spring as the buds came on the branches after winter. Then we waited and watched the leaves and flowers pop out and blossom. Then, eventually, the tree would start to grow the cherries. And, finally, the cherries would get ripe enough to pick and eat!

The best part was that my grandmother would come over, working a whole day in the kitchen to make cherry pies and small cherry tarts that were absolutely delicious!

And, if you thought about it, the cherry pits from each little cherry fruit could be used to grow a whole new cherry tree to produce more and more cherries!

So, here in Nebraska we know that there are a lot of growing steps that can’t be skipped before the plant actually produces fruit. Planting the seed is just a first step. Then the roots and the plant itself grow needing water, sunlight, and nutrients in the soil and air. Fruit trees need to grow branches and buds and leaves and blossoms before the fruit comes on.

Today, in our series on the Fruit of the Spirit, we’re looking at the last fruit Paul lists in Galatians 5: self-control. I don’t think it’s an accident that self-control is listed last. Just as fruit doesn’t appear and ripen until the end of the growing season, self-control isn’t something that happens independently of the other fruit, and certainly not without the Spirit’s nurture and power.

Self-control isn’t easy, is it. If self-control was easy, the diet industry wouldn’t need to exist. If self-control were easy, there wouldn’t be programs for how to quit smoking, or the need for AA or NA groups. If people could just control themselves all the time, there wouldn’t be people hurt by angry words, or physical abuse, or relationships that end due to infidelity or pornography. People wouldn’t get tickets for speeding, or buy too much online or at the outdoor home and garden show.

Self-control isn’t easy. It’s not a matter of sheer force of will. As much as we’d like to think so, we’re not that strong.

That’s the power of 12-Step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous that help us see how trying to do self-control on our own doesn’t work. The first three steps lay it out:

1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol or drugs or food or work or whatever has a hold on us. Our lives have become unmanageable.

2) We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3) We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.

Paul writes that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit – it comes from being rooted and grounded, fed, nurtured and led by the power of the Spirit that always brings life. It’s a power greater than us. Self-control is a result and product of the power of the Spirit, as well as the other fruit of the Spirit.

Without LOVE, for example, real self-control isn’t possible. It ends up being legalism. Love is the power behind exercising self-control – God loves you! God desires you to have love, joy, peace, patience and all the fruit that gives life! Self-control is one loving way to show yourself some love, and to live out your love for others.

In our Gospel lesson today from Luke, Jesus focuses on doing the loving thing on the Sabbath. The purpose of the law isn’t just the law – the purpose of the Sabbath laws is love of God and neighbor. So, Jesus is always pointing people toward doing the loving thing because God is all about love.

It’s the same with self-control – it is a fruit of the Spirit who is love itself! The purpose of self-control is love - controlling ourselves out of love for God, others and ourselves.

And, love is the patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and gentleness that upholds us as we struggle with self-control, giving us second chances. We can have self-control when we are patient with ourselves, kind and generous, faithful and gentle with ourselves. Self-control is possible as a fruit of the Spirit of love.

What can the fruit of self-control look like in your life and congregation?

One example is a ministry called Faith Partners in the Nebraska Synod that lifts this up in beautiful ways and gives us a way to live it out.

Faith Partners is a ministry of second chances. Faith Partners is a ministry that helps congregations take a team approach to alcohol, drug and mental health issues, focusing on prevention and recovery.

Faith Partners can help us become just as comfortable bringing casseroles to a family with a loved one in treatment as for one who is hospitalized for cancer.

The purpose of Faith Partners is to grow capacity in faith communities to respond with grace to alcohol, drug and behavioral health challenges. Wouldn’t it be amazing if AA and other recovery groups weren’t just off in a basement corner somewhere, but considered people we can learn from and encourage?

The goal is to have faith communities play their full role in prevention and to reduce stigma and isolation by openly addressing alcohol, drug and behavioral health issues. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if youth and people of all ages felt as though people in the congregation were safe to talk with about questions and struggles, and that they could ask to be in the prayers?

The vision is to have hundreds of faith communities across Nebraska that are prevention committed and recovery friendly.

Would you or your congregation be interested in learning more about Faith Partners? Would you like to consider forming a Faith Partners team in your congregation, or supporting the ministry in general? If so, contact the Nebraska Synod and ask for me or Pastor Otto Schultz, the Director of Faith Partners.

We live in a seed planting state. We know there are many steps to the growing season in order to bear fruit. We know there needs to be care and nurture all along the way.

As people of faith, we know we need the Spirit to grow our faith and discipleship. We know we need the Spirit to help us bear the fruit of self-control that feeds a world hungry for love and second chances. Thanks be to God for the gift of God’s life-giving Spirit! Taste and see that the Lord is good! The fruit of the Spirit is delicious indeed!

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