**Fruits of the Spirit – Faithfulness**

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Scriptures:

Psalm 63:1-6 NRSV

Galatians 5:22- 25 NRSV

Gospel Luke 13:6-9 NRSV

## Psalm: Psalm 63:1-6

1O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

2So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

3Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

4So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

5My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

6when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

7for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

8My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Epistle: Galatians 5:22- 25 NRSV

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. 26Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

**Gospel: Luke 13:6-9 NRSV**

*The Gospel according to St. Luke the 13th chapter.*

***Glory to you, O Lord.***

**6**Then he (Jesus) told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. **7**So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ **8**He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. **9**If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

*The gospel of the Lord.*

***Praise to you, O Christ.***

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**Sermon:**

Grace and peace to you this day as we gather as faithful disciples, in the company of saints and sinners, to give thanks and praise to God the Creator who calls us “Beloved Children”. We gather in community as followers, lifelong learners and servants grounded in God’s unconditional grace and love.

Thanks be to God.

I am [Deacon Sunni Richardson, a member of the Nebraska Synod staff serving as the Director for Leadership Development]. It is good to be with you today as we explore the faithfulness, one of the Fruits of the Spirit named in the reading from Galatians.

FAITHFULNESS is a word we often use in the church. Faithful means being true to or loyal and steadfast. We claim faithfulness to another person, a cause, activity, or our Christian beliefs.

Faithfulness is where we are going today. The Galatians scripture, often labeled Fruits of the Spirit, is a centering point for us as we acknowledge we are called, by God, to live by the Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Faithfulness is not always easy and faithful actions are not always clear cut. We see this in the parable Jesus shares with the group gathered with him. We get a law, rules and traditions, and a gospel story with love, grace and forgiveness.

Some background on the story. In earlier verses we would have read some Galileans had been killed by Pilate, who represented the powerful Roman Empire. The Pharisees, who were opposed to using force against Rome, thought the Galileans deserved to die because they were rebelling. The Zealots, described as anti-Rome terrorist, said the Galileans deserved to die because they were cooperating with Rome by working on the aqueduct, a major construction project. As usual they crowd is going back and forth on the why and how and soon, they begin to blame the Galileans for their own deaths. conversation moves from fact to judgment.

But Jesus is not willing to go there. He sets the record straight pointing out the Galileans were not killed because they were worse sinners. And, as Jesus so often does, he redirects their thinking and does a *mic drop*. Instead of blaming others, Jesus says they should consider, think about, their own judgement day. *Ouch!*

Sin, sinners, blame and judgment… You may recall other Bible stories where hard times, disabilities and illness were blamed on the individual’s sins or sins of the family. So, it is not surprising to hear Jesus say they were not worse sinners and sin was not the reason for their calamity. But he does not stop there. Jesus is such a great teacher. He gives them a parable.

Let me read our lesson from Luke again.

*Then he (Jesus) told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ The gardener replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”*

What’s going on here?

Well, land is valuable and a fruit tree that does not produce fruit, like it is created to do, is taking up valuable space. The owner wants it removed. Chop it down! Get it out of here! Plant a new tree in its place. The gardener, however, sees a different option. He offers the idea of nurturing the tree. “I will dig around it and put fertilizer on it. Let’s give it another chance. The owner was ready to be done with the tree. The gardener was seeing the situation through different lenses.

Society says, if you aren’t producing, then others are justified in giving up on you, pushing you out of the way and moving on down the road without you. Need an example? The wait staff at the restaurant is slow so we blast them on Facebook boldly declaring we will take our business elsewhere. The hard-working volunteer drops the ball on a project. We may never ask why or may not understand their excuse, but we are sure good at saying, “don’t ask Mr. Green Jeans to help because you can’t count on him". A tragic accident happens, and the response is to blame someone. “Serves them right” bubbles up which we all know is not a compassionate response.

Faithfulness. -- There are two sides of faithfulness, and we are called to engage in both. We are called through the Holy Spirit to be faithful in using our God-given gifts to serve. And, we are called to care for and nurture others so they can in turn use their gifts faithfully.

The gardener saw potential. God sees potential in you! God has gifted each of us as unique individuals with our own personality, quirks, talents and skills. It is in community, with a village, that we grow as disciples and learn to use our gifts faithfully. We grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The gifts of the Spirit call us to practice listening to each other and to the Holy Spirit. How is the Holy Spirit speaking to you as you ponder situations, try to answer tough questions, strive for survival, and build relationships?

Society preaches listening but most of us could use some listening lessons. Listening requires being quiet, pausing, being intentional in blocking out the noise that distracts us. That noise might be voices in the background, a news story that is still rattling around in our head or listening to our own voice as we formulate our clever response.

Bishop Patricia Davenport of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod, spoke at a recent event for Nebraska Synod leaders. She shared a story of the congregation creating what sounded like an amazing serve project. It hit all their mission statement marks but when it came to volunteering to take the project to the next level no one stepped up. They prayed for volunteers, they prayed for direction and prayed for funds. But no one stepped up. That was when they switched their prayers and practiced listening in a new way. The project was great but was it their project to carry? Was the Holy Spirit calling them to do this work? They decided through prayer, listening and the lack of passionate energy they were not called to breathe life into this project, at least not at this time. They moved on and found another project that matched their gifts, met the benchmarks of their mission statement, and allowed them to serve in a new and exciting way in their community.

Gifts, passion, Holy Spirit listening – it’s like a dot-to-dot picture or a puzzle. The pieces need to fit together. That’s faithfulness! Faithfulness starts with prayer, holy listening and the wise use of gifts and talents.

We strive to be faithful. But there this thing, that through the years has grown, and sometimes works against us in the church. It is called the “warm body syndrome” (not an official medical disease). We go hunting for a warm body. Prayer is often an afterthought. We are on a roll with a great project. Tasks are listed and the goal is to find anyone who will say “yes”. Sometimes we are forced into the survival mode but not always. We get caught up in our to-do lists and forget to consider the gifts, talents and skills needed to do the work. Who has the imagination needed to turn an old-hat idea into a new creation? Who is a good planner and how do we use their gifts? Who are the worker-bees who take the lists and magically gets the work done? Who engages others and knows how to invite? It is easy to get caught up in the work. I invite us to engage as faithful disciples, spreading fertilizer (fertilizer sounds better here than manure) to support others in the village and listening for where God is calling us to serve.

Think of a time when you’ve spread a little fertilizer and saw new life emerge. Farmers, ranchers, gardeners you have experienced the real deal. Teachers you nurture students with creative lesson plans and tutoring. Kids you share smiles, words of encouragement for your team and classmates and you share with others. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and adopted family members you give your hearts to little ones, help them learn a new skill even though it would have been easier to just do it yourself and you advocate for their needs. Oh, here is a biggie – talk about fertilizing - parents hand off car keys with words of caution after nerve-racking driving lessons. Employees and employers teach the newbie the lay of the land, the rules and where to put their lunch. Affirmations and encouragement abound as they live into the job. I could go on with other examples, but I think you get the point. We have all had an opportunity to spread a little fertilizer and nurture new growth. Each of those fertilizer spreading adventures started with listening and parking judgment on the curb.

We are invited to engage in Holy listening, Holy Spirit listening and prayer.

We are equipped to be teachers, advocates, encouragers and fertilizers.

We are reminded by Jesus that judgment is not ours to command.

Faithfulness is using our gifts wisely and growing our gifts and talents for the sake of the gospel.

Faithfulness is naming the gifts of others and identifying opportunities for them to engage and utilize their gifts for the sake of the Kingdom.

The gardener in the parable could have grabbed the axe and cut down the tree. He chose a different plan.

May we be wise gardeners who offer the gift of grace, reserve judgment and nurture others with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Amen.