

Date: 30 June 2019
Lesson: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

“The fruit of the Spirit’s not a coconut. The fruit of the Spirit’s not a coconut. The fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

That’s a song I learned long ago to sing with kids. For each verse, the kids name a fruit, and then we make a motion to go with it: Apple, Grapes, Watermelon, Peach. You always start with coconut, though, because it is the most silly. Yes, the song is full of words, but I have seen some really young kids get it. *“The fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* So why did the Apostle Paul compose a list of the Fruit of the Spirit? Did he want to give Christian children a memorization exercise for Sunday School? Did he feel Christians needed a morality list? Did he want a cutesy rhyme to be made of it? No. He shares this list with us because we have been freed by Christ to live this Fruit of the Spirit.

See, Paul established some congregations in the pagan region that was called Galatia, located in modern day Turkey. He proclaimed the good news, people converted, he formed them into congregations, and eventually he moved on from Galatia to continue his missionary work. After some time away, Paul catches word that these Galatian Christians are now bickering and in turmoil. In a nutshell, what had happened is that some other Christians had arrived in Galatia, and they said that Paul had led them astray from the get-go. We’ll call these people Paul’s opponents. These opponents were on board with Christianity and its spreading, but they disagreed with Paul on what a person must do before becoming a Christian. Paul had taught that all it takes to become a Christian is the grace of Jesus Christ. Paul’s opponents, however, said that Christians are bound to live according to the Law -- or the long set of rules -- in the same way as the Jewish faith is bound to living by it. Because without the Law, how could a community of faith function with any semblance of order? Without the Law, what is going to keep people from doing whatever their baser instincts

tell them to do? So, according to Paul's opponents, if any pagan men in Galatia wanted to become Christians, those men needed to be circumcised first before the conversion would count.

Right now you may be thinking, "How could these arguments from 2,000 years ago ever be relevant for us today? The ins and outs of Pagan to Christian conversion? Debates about circumcision in order to fulfill Jewish Law?" At face value, those things shouldn't have much to say about life in the 21st Century on this side of the globe. However, it is the argument that Paul makes in response to his opponents that matters to us. Instead of walking back his teachings, Paul digs in deep. We have been saved by God's grace alone. By grace *alone*. Fudging that truth is not an option for Paul. To give up a tiny bit of God's grace in order to make a little room for the Law is to give up grace entirely. Salvation is either 100% a gift of grace, or it is not grace at all.

So without the Law, what brings order to a faith community? Without the Law, what becomes the foundation for our ethics... for our moral deliberations? Love, Paul says. "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." That's a paradox: You are free. God's grace has given freedom from the Law to all Christians. So now use that freedom to become slaves to one another through love.

Paul's point is that God's radical gift of grace makes us absolutely free to live out -- here and now -- the New Creation that God first ushered in on Easter morning. That New Creation -- the Kingdom of God -- is not something that remains out there in the future. That future first broke into this world on Easter morning and it continually inserts itself into our lives so that we get to live out God's future -- God's reign -- now. So what does that look like to be free to live in God's New Creation now? Paul says it looks like being servants to one another -- being slaves to one another -- out of the love we have for each other. This love comes from the love and grace that Jesus first shows us. Jesus calls us by name. He leads us, he guides us, and because we move and live and grow in Jesus, the love of Jesus moves, lives, and grows in us. And that love... it is experienced together... as a community of faith. When we live out this love of Christ together, it is expressed in real ways. Paul calls those the Fruit of the Spirit.

“The fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Do you hear how every single one of those words is something necessary for a faith community to function together? These are about loving each other, serving each other, and striving to live in harmony with one another. That list is best understood as the tools that -- when combined -- enable us to enjoy that true Fruit of the Spirit: a community of faith functioning out of mutual love.

I spent this past week at Lutheridge with Pastor Ginger, Miss Tricia, and seven of our catechism students. It was a phenomenal and transformative week. We were joined with about 80 others in a program called Kairos. There was a part of each day during Kairos that anyone could voluntarily take a stone and drop it into a big metal bucket, and while they did that they would share what their “milestone” for the day was. It could be anything, from goofy to serious, from joyous to sad. “I really loved breakfast.” -- And everyone would respond “Milestone!” as the person dropped the stone in the bucket.

“I finished by craft project today.” -- *“Milestone!”*

“My cabin worked together to get over the challenge wall.” -- *“Milestone!”*

As a leader in the program, I had observed on the first day that there were a few campers who had some social peculiarities. They tended to stay to themselves and not interact with others much. At the start of the week, a pastor challenged all the campers to strive to live out the New Creation that we are in Jesus. To live now the values of God’s future. So instead of resorting to the social ladder that middle schoolers tend to make -- you know: cool kids on top, jokesters, athletes, and on down -- this week at Lutheridge the campers were asked to see themselves as free to live as a New Creation in Christ: meaning that as they move, live, and grow in Christ, Christ’s love will move, live, and grow in them. So it warmed my heart when not long after that pastor’s appeal, those socially peculiar kids began to voluntarily stand up and, dropping a stone into the bucket, say, “I now have some friends.”

“Milestone.”

You should be proud of the youth that you sent to Lutheridge, because each of them went deeper into their faith, allowing the love of Christ to animate their interactions with others. To be

honest, being animated by God's love isn't reserved for a week at camp. It is meant for congregations like ours. Congregations are the perfect place to actually put into action the Christian ideals of love and service. Because we have our own peculiarities, our own viewpoints, our own opinions. These differences should never be an excuse to take our marbles and go home; our differences are the fertile ground for the love of Christ to animate our life together. Our differences are the ideal places where the Kingdom of God -- that New Creation -- can break in and take root in our midst.

The world around us might be increasingly at each other's throats, but here we can live out God's transforming grace through our love for each other. That is why a 2,000 year old argument about circumcision has some relevance for us today. It is because we do not live by the Law, we live by God's grace, and that grace gives us the Fruit of the Spirit to be a community that functions out of Christ's love. Living in God's love and grace how we come to know what the Fruit of the Spirit is. And we all know what it is not.

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Amen.