

“A Delicious Basket of Summer Fruit”

Text: Amos 8: 1 – 2; Galatians 5: 22 -25

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Among the benefits of Pam’s weekly trips to the rich farmlands of Pennsylvania is that she brings home the most delicious summer produce. This past week she brought home cantaloupe and peaches that were out of this world. And other weeks it’s been cucumbers, honeydew-melons, berries, zucchini, tomatoes, plums. In fact, so far the only crop that’s been a little bit “iffy” this year is the corn – something about too much rain, I suppose. Such fruit and vegetables in all of their variety has always been one of the treats that we enjoy when Pam goes back home.

Take that thought and step right to our scripture passage with me because what we have this morning, plain and simple, is a kind of basket of fruit, not from Lewisburg, Pennsylvania but from ancient Galatia and the Apostle Paul. He was making a list, and Paul was an avid list-maker, of the attributes that should rightly be a part of the lives of those who follow Jesus. In essence, it’s an ethical list, that is, a collating of intentional ways that human beings can choose to live and behave. “By their fruits you shall know them,” as Jesus once said. And though his list to the early church is not intended as an exhaustive inventory, it gives us a good start.

Let’s simply take measure this morning, each for ourselves. How are we doing in our own fruitfulness? And, incidentally, as you hear each of them named, Paul is actually speaking in contrast¹; that is, he lists out the fruits we should be producing in contrast to another list in which he names the opposite. He believed that with the help of the Spirit, we can opt to consistently choose the better way.² So let’s keep on the positive part of his list for today, and these are the fruits of which he speaks . . .

The first fruit in the Greek of his letter is *agape*. Or, in our accustomed language, its love – the particular kind of love that is at the heart of relationship and community; the sort of love that always seeks the good and the best for others; the quality of love that gives freely without expecting any return.

Love like this is an expansive quality. It always seeks to be larger. Its primary impulse is to give back more than it has received. So with this kind of love there is not counting going on, there is not calculating, and the only kind of list-keeping-or-making is to imagine how to give more. Paul begins his summer basket with the ethical imperative to love because it is, hands down, the most important in Christian life.

Back to the basket and next is *chara* as Paul spoke, which is joy as we do. This is not meant simply as a synonym for happiness which is such an illusive desire in our culture and world. No, happiness is temporal and conditional. But joy goes far beyond all such edges. Joy is grounded deeper than time and place. Joy is an eternal quality. It’s that profound sense that life is good and that everything, in God’s good time, will be well.

Joy is what beat in the heart of Etty Hillesum as she was imprisoned in a Nazi death camp and wrote in her diary: “It still comes down to the same thing: Life is great and beautiful and fascinating and eternal, and I believe in the goodness of God!”³

Eirene is next, or peace as we know it. This particular meaning in Greek refers to the laying down of arms and the cessation of warfare. It is not born of the dream that conflicts no longer exist. But it is the choice to resolve conflict without the violence that we have grown accustomed to.

Patience is in the basket, or in the Greek, *makrothumia*. Long-suffering and endurance are listed as synonyms. Here’s a story to help me tell. “A young monk joined an order that required total silence. At his direction the abbot could allow any monk to speak – but that did not happen very often. It was nearly five years before the abbot approached the novice and said, “You make speak two words.” Choosing his words carefully, the monk said, “hard bed.” With genuine concern the abbot said, “I’m sorry your bed isn’t comfortable. Well see if we can get you another.” Around his tenth year the abbot allowed again, “You may speak two words. “Cold food,” the monk said. And again, the abbot promised to do something about that. Five more years and the abbot allowed again, “You may speak two words.” The monk said, “I quit.” And the abbot said, “It’s probably for the best. You’ve been here for 15 years and you’ve done nothing but complain since you got here!”⁴

Patience, peace, joy, love . . . and we add kindness now. *Chrestotes*. And let me link that with four more: Goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. For the purists among us these are *agathosune, pistis, prautes, and enkrateia* – respectively.

The New York Times ran an op-art piece at the beginning of September last year. It was called “The Lost Summer.”⁵ It was very clever. A collective of artists in New York asked a few questions like: “What did you manage to do this summer? Did you accomplish everything you set out to accomplish back around Memorial Day? Is anything left undone?” And then they provided post-it notes on certain store windows all around the city. Amazingly, 6,000 people filled out those little squares; and then they were all collated into this expressive display.

Among them were these, appropriate to our basket of fruit. “Be kind to George.” “Drop the sarcasm.” “Make an effort to be easier on Mom.” These are all measures of kindness, a fruit of the spirit. “Take another leap of faith.” “More time meditating.” “Practice engaged mindfulness.” These are all pistis, faithfulness. “Listen quietly to wind.” “Play catch with Bobby.” These are measures of prautes, gentleness. “Stop eating fat and drinking beer.” That’s enkrateia, self-control. So are these one, “Hold my tongue,” and “learn to keep my mouth shut.”

A couple more with nothing to do with fruit amused me. “Teach the dog better manners.” “Sue my landlord.” “Go for therapy, then to Six Flags.” “Sky-dive.” “Buy a fast car.” “Have this baby.” “Learn to throw a curve ball.” “Make ripples.” “Move to Canada!” Many of these were with exclamation points!

And so our summer fruit basket, the fruits of the Spirit: we take one last step. The Hebrew Scriptures give us an interesting image to play with. It seems that God was once speaking to Amos, the prophet. God was trying to impress upon Amos the urgency of life and the fact that things come to an end, that things go by, that all will not be forever, that we only have a brief while to make things right, and that, therefore, positive action is imperative. And so God showed Amos a basket of ripe summer fruit. God asked, “Amos, what do you see?” Amos said, “A basket of summer fruit.” And immediately Amos got the point. He knew it! Fruit that sits very long in the summer goes quickly bad. A single day and it can all go by.

So take heed! Be fruitful, as God intends for all of us to be! Enjoy the peaches! Savor in kindness and goodness! Make the choice to be patient and peaceful! Exude joy and gentleness! Tend to the harvest of your hearts! Don't let these fruits go by! For this is the lesson of the Lord for us today, and you can trust it as true. Amen.

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¹ Charles B. Cousar. Interpretation: Galatians. John Knox Press, 1982, p. 133.

² Leander Keck, ed. The New Interpreter's Bible. Abingdon Press, 2000, p. 330.

³ Ety Hillesum. An Interrupted Life. Owl Books, 1996, pp. 72-73; 96-97.

⁴ Will Bowen. A Complaint Free World. Doubleday Press, 2007, pp. 69-70.

⁵ The New York Times; Sunday, September 2, 2007; Op-Art, “The Lost Summer.