

Love, Joy, and Cantaloupe!

Text: Amos 8: 11-12; Galatians 5: 22-25

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I am keenly aware that vacation is on the near horizon now! Just one more week! Pam and I are looking forward to the change of pace and the ease that it promises, and also for some time to visit a few favorite places.

"So what do you want be sure to take in when we are in Pennsylvania?" I asked - even though I already had a good hunch at how she would respond.

"Cantaloupe," she said quickly. "There's nothing like fresh Pennsylvania cantaloupe!" She's right about that. And really, whatever is ripe for harvest garners pretty high praise out there - berries of variety, snap peas, peaches and plums and corn.

She went on, "And maybe we could just a drive around to see the old haunts." (She has a favorite place from childhood along Buffalo Creek that she and her friends called "The Dime and Sinkers.") "And a ham," she went on, "I want to get a ham to bring home."

Hold those brief thoughts now. Tuck them to one side of your mind while we open a letter that, by various mysteries, arrived this very morning – addressed simultaneously and particularly to each of us!

It's a letter that Paul wrote to the early church in Galatia – though honestly, it could have been the church gathered anywhere – even the church at Farmington and South Main. Among other things, he wrote about fruit, though admittedly of a different variety.

His words. "Live by the Spirit. And the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

And then he popped in this peculiar sentence: "There is no law against such things!" Which contextually tells us that he was speaking to folks who were perhaps resistant to such virtues; underestimating their importance; not sure of if they really mattered.

So we have this metaphor of fruit at Paul's suggestion, spiritual fruit. And just to air them a bit differently for our consideration, let me tell you with in Paul's Greek rather than the same old English that we still and often do not understand so well.

Paul again, "Live by the Spirit. And the fruits of the spirit are . . ."

Agape. That's love and it's at top of Paul's list. It's about the mystery we can never get enough of in our lives – that which bears, believes, hopes and endures all things. He's referring to an amazing power we can set loose in the world by our choosing. It's to

take on an undefeatable benevolence and unconquerable goodwill that always seeks and sees the best and highest of and for the other. Like many of Paul's writings, it appeals to the will rather than to emotion, and describes the unconditional love that God has for the world."¹ There is no law against this! And YIKES could we ever use more agape in the world today.

Chara. That's joy. Joy here is not simply a synonym for happiness, which is so illusive a desire in our culture and world. Happiness is temporal and conditional yet joy goes beyond all such edges. It is grounded deeper than time and place. Joy is an eternal quality. It is that profound sense that life is good and that everything, in God's unfathomable heart, will be well. So be joyful! Even when we can't necessarily get our hands around the reason! There is no law against this!

Eirene. The fruit of peace. This particular meaning in Greek refers to the laying down of arms and the cessation of warfare. It is not born of the larger dream of shalom that conflicts no longer exist – though let's not lose that hope. But it is the intentional choice to resolve conflict without the violence that we have grown accustomed to. So be seekers of peace. There is no law against this!

But let's overload the basket now, chockfull, abundant, even to overflowing. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. Or, for the purists among us: *makrothumia, chrestotes, agathosune, pistis, prautes, and enkrateia.*

Let's take that last one and look closer - Enkrateia. Self-control. Sociologists tell us that one of the signs of cultural erosion and stress is a kind of normlessness, anomie it's called, where the rules of civility fall away and people say and do some pretty hurtful things.

More: their studies reveal that losing some of the filters of our own self-control, being rude for an example, creates an illness in the social fabric of our lives that becomes contagious. Epidemic even.

And rudeness, along with its larger cousin bullying, can spread like a common cold eventually affecting and infecting everyone – making the whole world sick. If I am rude to you, the chances are that the rudeness will come back to me, with increased volume and greater magnitude.

Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson has done research that was featured on CBS This Morning.² She says that the verifiable and replicable conclusion is that people behaving badly is contagious. The more encouraging news is that people behaving appropriately is just as spreadable.

That's what Paul is calling us to, whether we live in West Hartford or Galatia. Live by the fruits of the Spirit. They are the better way. They lead us in the way of Christ. And, by the way, he also says in his letter, "I have told you this before!"

One more step. The Hebrew Scriptures provide an interesting image to play with and mingle in as we end.

God was speaking to Amos, the prophet, 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 be forever, that we have only a very brief while to make things right, and that, therefore, positive action is imperative.

So God showed Amos a basket of perfectly ripe summer fruit. (I wonder if there was Pennsylvania cantaloupe included!) God asked, "Amos, what do you see?" Amos said, "A basket of summer fruit."

God paused to give Amos some time to think about it. But it didn't take long for Amos to get the point. The message came on like a light bulb in his mind. Fruit that sits very long in the summer goes quickly bad. A single day and it can all go by.

So take heed! Live by the fruits of the Spirit! Enjoy the peaches! Savor in kindness and goodness! Make the choice to be patient and peaceful! Exude gentleness and joy! Tend to the harvest of your hearts! Don't let these fruits go by!

This is the lesson of God for us today, and you can trust it to be true! Amen.

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¹ Wikipedia search: "Fruits of the Spirit."

² Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson. "Rude Behavior Can Spread Like the Common Cold" CBS This Morning, Summer 2017.