

Spiritual Fruit
Psalm 16
Galatians 5:1,16-26

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 16

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you."

As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight.

Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Galatians 5:1,16-26

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, 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. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

After Jesus has been raised from the dead, when he comes to see his disciples, he breathes on them and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."¹ Wind, breath, and spirit are all connected here – in the Greek in which the New Testament was originally written, they are all the same word, *pneuma*.

¹ John 20:22

Where there is breath, there is life. The spirit that enlivens Christ in the resurrection is his gift in his breath to those whom he loves. His risen life becomes their life.

A few weeks later that gentle breath becomes a violent wind with tongues of fire resting on Jesus' followers. Those followers are enabled to testify to Christ in whatever languages are needed for everyone in Jerusalem to hear the Truth of Jesus Christ and his resurrection.

You knew I was going to say this, but this piece of Paul's letter to the Galatians has a context. Paul is writing to this church in present-day Turkey, because they are coming under the influence of some people teaching a different gospel from the one Jesus taught. These people are preaching that, in order to be a proper Christian, all the Christian people of Galatia have to first become proper Jews. For the men, this includes circumcision, in a time without modern anesthesia, sterile operating conditions, or antibiotics. Evidentially these preachers were, umm, persuasive.

Paul explains that the Law, including circumcision, was always intended to be a guide through a transition period, while the people were growing up. A child may be the heir to a fortune, but, until that child comes of age, he or she lives according to the will of the people assigned to look after them. One hopes that the values that are taught to the child during this time stick, and shape how the child lives later.

Once a child has come of age, they should love their guardians for the service they have done for them, but they do not have to obey them any more. The former child has been set free to live as they choose.

Before we start thinking that this is an excuse not to have any rules, the coming of the Holy Spirit into the people's hearts is the coming of age in this analogy. The coming of age does

not mean that people will live in just any way that occurs to them. Paul describes the things that are not of the Holy Spirit: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

These “desires of the flesh” are the things that Paul says do not characterize someone who has the Holy Spirit in their heart. The big-C Church, meaning “The Christian Church universal,” has a history of criticizing some of these in the world, but not evenly. The big-C church tends to think of the so-called “desires of the flesh” as only meaning indulging bodily desires, but there are many other sins on that list, sins of the heart and the mind, and I suspect those are more common. The Church criticizes so-called physical sins a lot more quickly and more stringently than we do, say, dissension, or creating factions. It’s a lot easier to criticize other people’s sins that you don’t share, I guess.

The fruit of the Spirit, and remember, Jesus did say that we would know a tree by its fruit,² “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These are not separate and distinct fruits – this is one package, the fruit of the Spirit. These are things that go together, and that we should all strive toward. There is no law against these things.

It is not a contest. No one is really trying to be more in tune with the Spirit than other people. If they are, I suspect that they are really trying to have other people see them as being more “Spiritual” than others. That goes back to jealousy and envy, on that list of desires of the flesh. No, we should all be striving for these things, and striving to be better than we were

² Matthew 7:15-20.

before. One of the great benefit of the fruit of the Spirit is that we don't need to be better than other people.

In our popular culture, the word *spiritual* seems to be tied to mystical experiences or ethereal senses, and to things that are not understood. The less we understand something, in fact, the more likely it is that someone will call it "spiritual."

The appearance of the Holy Spirit, though, is specific, and we understand some things about it. Wherever the Holy Spirit appears, it is tied to the identity and mission of God, either the Father, in the Old Testament, or Christ, in the New, and the Spirit's work is to draw people together into positive community.

This fruit of the Holy Spirit brings us into better community with each other and with God. It's obvious that someone who exhibits love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is more pleasant to be in community with than otherwise. And certainly, more pleasant to be around than someone who tends toward jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy.

But it's more than our personal preferences at work here. When we strive to display these virtues, which are the fruit of the spirit, in our lives, we become more attuned to the Spirit itself. We do not have to achieve these virtues on our own. When we strive toward them, the Spirit will help us to achieve them and remake us.

There is an old story³ of a degenerate named Lord George Hell. George is a depraved Victorian British aristocrat who manages to check off most of the sins of the flesh that Saint Paul

³ "The Happy Hypocrite: A Fairy Tale for Tired Men," by Max Beerbohm (1897). Text available at http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/36497?msg=welcome_stranger

noted. He is a drinker, a carouser, and a womanizer. George is enjoying himself in this vein when he is struck by love for a young and innocent woman named Jenny.

Jenny, though, will only marry a man with the face of a saint. George's face reflects his many years of degeneracy. He purchases a mask of a saint's face, and manages to marry Jenny, signing the marriage register, "Lord George Heaven."

Lord George finds himself returning ill-gotten wealth to gamblers whom he had cheated. He finds himself donating extra money to charities. He finds himself staying in of an evening, rather than carousing with his notorious cronies.

One month after the marriage, as the happy couple is celebrating the occasion, one of Lord George's old lovers shows up and refuses to leave until she is granted one last look at his true face. A scuffle between the three people results in the old lover tearing off George's mask.

George fears that he has lost his new wife, and he is puzzled when Jenny does not turn away. Only when he sees his face reflected does he realize that his face, through constant usage, has become the very image of the mask he had worn. The story ends with George kissing his beloved wife, and the unneeded mask melting in the sun.

Over time, provided we are consistent, we become what we pretend to be, or what we try to be. Let us try, all of us, to show more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in our lives. We will help the Holy Spirit to make the world a better place, starting with ourselves.

AMEN.