

"FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT, PART 1: PEACE"

Galatians 5:16-25; John 14:26-27; Luke 19:41-44

January 24, 2021

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Galatians 5:22 with its list of "the fruits of the Spirit" is one of those Bible verses we've heard more times than we could count – an uplifting litany of qualities we aspire to – or should aspire to – manifest in our life of faith. The words have a poetry to them, and they fit perfectly on an inspirational plaque... or t-shirt, tote bag, key chain, water bottle, bracelet, face mask, or kitchen towel. There are literally hundreds of such items available on Amazon alone.

But it's far more difficult to come to grips with the fruits of the Spirit in real life than it is to order up some wall art or a piece of jewelry with a credit card... as the rest of the 5th chapter of Galatians suggests. I'll come back to that.

Today we begin our series of sermons on the various fruits of the Spirit with some reflections on "peace." No, we aren't doing the fruits of the Spirit in order, and no, I can't at this moment remember why we decided to start with peace. ☺ But it didn't take me long to start wondering if all the fruits of the Spirit are going to be as challenging as "peace." I guess we shall see.

I hardly need to say, do I, that peace is elusive in our world and in our lives? We have only to look around at the wars and conflict and violence in our world, at the massive amounts of resources devoted to "security" measures and prisons, at our deep divisions ... and we see how difficult peace is. We have only to listen to the rhetoric of hate, the anger and fear in so many people's voices, the noise of our culture... and we feel the impossibility of peace. We experience in our relationships how hard it is to be at peace with one another. And no matter how much we desire it, it's hard to find peace within ourselves: between the state of the world, and interpersonal tensions, and all the things we have to worry about, and mistakes we fret over or sins unrepented, not to mention our busy and distracted minds ... there is no end to the things that fill our bodies with tension, steal our sleep, and disturb the peace of our souls.

When I started putting together today's service, I soon discovered that most hymns and prayers with "peace" as a theme fell into one of two categories: They dealt either with peace between people, groups, or nations, and the work of justice and reconciliation *or* with the personal, spiritual, inner peace grounded in God's presence in one's life. I wanted to bring both of these ideas together. But liturgy and song that incorporate them both are few. So few that I actually went and looked up the Hebrew and Greek words for peace, just to make sure there wasn't a different word I'd forgotten about that might have made this distinction. Nope. In both Biblical languages, peace is peace.

The bifurcation of peace into these two different visions reflects perennial tensions within Christianity: between spirituality and social justice, between the individual and the communal, between the private and the public aspects of faith. Even knowing that these are false dichotomies, we have to struggle sometimes to bring a whole understanding of our faith into focus.

As much as we want to feel peaceful and be peaceful, our struggles are real. People around us can be annoying, demanding, and hostile. The anxieties we have about the future or the worries we have about our loved ones are not without cause. Hard and confusing choices abound. Pressure to compromise our beliefs is strong. We can't escape these things. Even when we do manage to feel a sense of peace in our lives, an undercurrent of disquiet often reminds us that we might be simply denying or avoiding our problems. And it's only too easy to grasp a kind of personal serenity through indifference to stuff we ought to care about.

As much as we believe in the Biblical call to peacemaking and reconciliation, we are often stymied by the reality that the work itself can feel anything but peaceful. The work of peace actually engages us in conflict, because it involves championing justice. It means opposing violence. It questions things many people believe. It speaks uncomfortable truths. It brings us face to face with people we disagree with. So, naturally, it not-infrequently meets with anger and hostility. That's true even when our efforts at reconciliation are more personal; it's very hard to speak truthfully about our hurts and our regrets, and we have no control over how our overtures are received. Being a peaceful person, even while at the same time being motivated by righteous anger or a determination to tell unwelcome truth is no easy thing. It's not at all unusual to see passion for a peaceful cause undermined by a far-from peaceful spirit. Even more often, fear of conflict leads us to pull away from the work of peace.

It seems like peace, of all things, ought to be simple, but it's complicated, isn't it?

In both the Hebrew "shalom" and the Greek "eirene," *peace* is an expansive, multipurpose word that means much more than either personal tranquility or the absence of violent conflict (though it includes both of those meanings). Peace in the Biblical lexicon describes a comprehensive vision of wholeness, health, safety, community, justice, reconciliation, and good intent toward others. It implies care for the earth and its creatures. The word for peace is frequently used as a greeting in Hebrew and related languages – a way of saying, from the moment of meeting another person, that you mean them only good. *Shalom* also hints at the presence of God, the kingdom of God, a life lived at peace with God. In the New Testament, *eirene* refers often to the reconciliation between human beings and God that Jesus embodied and gave his life to complete.

This helps us, I think, to bring together our two often disparate ideas of what peace means. I'm not sure it makes it any easier for us to experience, to live in, or to foster peace. It might just show us how far off the mark we usually are.

There are some words in the Bible that seem to me to speak with absolute clarity and poignancy today as much as when they were uttered. When Jesus says, “*if only* you knew the things that make for peace...” he could be speaking right to us. I can hear the sorrow in his voice.

Jesus is on the way to the cross when he speaks those words. He’s coming into Jerusalem for the last time; this is part of the Palm Sunday story, but Jesus knows that the adoring crowds won’t stick with him. Only a couple verses on, Luke will note that the religious leaders are already looking for a way to kill him.

We sometimes forget that those other words of Jesus about peace, those comforting words he spoke to his friends about the peace he would give them so that their hearts need not be troubled ... those words were also spoken just before he was betrayed, arrested, tried, and crucified. Even as he was speaking, it was already clear that his life was threatened and his followers were facing a time of terrible fear and upheaval. I’m not sure what to make of that, except to note that peace seems to be *in the midst of*, and *in spite of* things that oppose and aim to destroy peace. All our modern prophets of peace reinforce this; nearly all of them rose up out of situations of conflict and violence. We are not called out of the world but into it. When peace seems far away is the time when we most need the call to peace. The angels didn’t say “peace on earth, good will to all,” because that vision was close to being realized, but because it was needed so desperately.

We know what that is like. But it’s really hard live our lives in that vision.

I used to have a quote on my bulletin board – I don’t know where it came from – that went something like this: “We seek an unhurried day of peace and power.” I loved that quote. I loved the idea of living that way... not merely being calm and whole and centered, but out of that attitude *also* having strength and courage, accomplishing things, making a difference. I probably don’t need to tell you that I rarely managed to live up to the aspirations of that quote.

My star gift for 2021 is “groundedness,” which I suspect may be a call not unlike that quote: to a life that centers itself in God’s *shalom* but lives faithfully within a world full of brokennesses that need healing.

I believe we all want that. I believe we are all called to that.

I think the Biblical vision of *shalom* helps us to seek peace in a way that is not self-centered, or narrowly focused on some particular issue, or merely sentimental. It gives shape to the longing for peace we sometimes can’t articulate. It gives us a way to see the many meanings of peace as reflections of one coherent whole.

But both Jesus and the Apostle Paul make it clear that peace is not a DIY project. Peace is the gift of the Spirit of God; it is the *fruit* of the Spirit’s work in us. The metaphor of

“fruit” here is instructive: it suggests growth, cultivation, a *process* that might take some time. We can cooperate with this process but we are not in charge of it. Live by the Spirit, Paul says. Be led by the Spirit. Be guided by the Spirit.

The context of Paul’s beautiful fruits-of-the-Spirit word list reminds us that, well, there is *context*. An inspirational plaque quite understandably leaves out the unpeaceful inclinations Paul mentions – enmities, jealousy, factions, quarrels, anger – but it’s not really helpful to pretend they don’t exist. The things that pull us away from peace are real. They call to us and we are drawn to them. It’s a struggle. We have to turn away from those things to make room for peace to take root and grow in us. We have to stop cultivating them, so that peace can flourish in us.

The final thing I would say about peace is that you can never really understand or seek or embrace or experience or make peace *just* through pursuing peace by itself. The prophets tell us that peace requires justice. Jesus suggests that peace requires trust. Paul suggests that it requires repentance, which requires truthfulness, which requires humility.

It’s difficult to talk about peace without referencing the other fruits of the Spirit. I suspect that we are going to find, over the next few weeks, that the fruits of the Spirit are *all* intertwined. That peace will teach us something about joy, that kindness will help us become more peaceful, that the work of peace requires patience and generosity. I’m looking forward to what we discover as we think about these things. I hope you too are eager to find out where the Spirit leads us. I’m grateful that we have this opportunity to reflect on how the fruits of God’s Spirit are being nurtured in our lives and our community of faith, and I pray they may flourish yet more abundantly in us. Amen.