

*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. – Gal. 5:13-25*

Last Sunday during worship, I asked us to see if we could list all of the Fruits of the Spirit from Gal. 5, and we did it! In fact, we even added a few extra that show up in a Catholic translation of the bible called the Vulgate (which includes faith, chastity, and modesty beyond the usual nine). For the next few weeks, we're going to look at each of these Fruits of the Spirit and how they might play out uniquely in COVIDland.

But first, context! "Any text taken out of context becomes a pretext for saying whatever you want." We regularly hear the fruit of the spirit listed, and maybe even the next line ("against such things there is no law") but seldom if ever do we hear it as a discussion about a battle between God's spirit and our desires. As you read, that's the discussion that Paul is having with the churches in Galatia – they are finding the fight between their own wants and God's commands to be harder than they expected. Sound familiar?

In our culture that proclaims not only that you CAN have everything just the way you want it, but that you SHOULD have it that way (as a moral right) this teaching is really, really hard. The idea of setting aside what we want for the sake of obedience to God's plan or out of care for others seems not just difficult but wrong. Today I was hearing stories about people suing governments for making them shelter in place. These people believe they have a moral right to gather, get a haircut, or see their elderly relatives even if that is the very act that could spread COVID, killing the vulnerable and forcing yet another lockdown. We fight hardest for our rights to get our own way, regardless of the consequences.

Paul calls this "the flesh", one of his terms for our own selfish, personal desires. This can be as heinous as sexual immorality or as simple as taking the last donut from the box. Any desire that causes us to ignore the needs of others so that we can get what we want fits this category of "the flesh". And this is a HUGE category. In fact, most things we do can be traced back to some form of selfish desire. But Paul says, "there's another way". To put the needs of others before our own, whether that means having a cookie instead of Mom's donut or sheltering in place yet another month for the sake of our vulnerable populations, is the calling of God for each one of us.

And that's where the fruit come in. Somewhat out of the blue, Paul pulls this metaphor of fruit out and uses it to describe another way of living, an unselfish, other-focused, Godly way of living. He doesn't expound on the idea of fruit, but just tosses it out there, allowing us to think about what fruit has to teach us. It's our job to ponder that fruit is born when a tree is healthy, not when it is sick. It's up to us to ponder that fruit is the byproduct of the work of caring for the tree: giving it fertilizer, sunlight, water, trimming and pruning it. We get to meditate on the fact that fruit is never for the tree, but for nourishing the people around it and spreading its seeds in order to make more trees. It's a powerful metaphor, and a great gift of Paul to us.

So, each of us gets to choose whether we will live our life based on our own desires ("but I don't want to go to bed, so I'll stay up all night even if it makes me sick") or on God's plan ("I really want to mock that person on Facebook, but God calls me to encourage others, so I'll do that.") And if we choose to live by God's plan, we will find ourselves bearing the fruit of love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and goodness, and kindness, and faithfulness, and gentleness, and self control.

Question to ponder: Which do you choose, to live by the flesh (your own desires) or by God's plan for your life?