

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Keeping in Step with the Spirit”**

**Luke 9:51 – 62
Galatians 5:1, 13 – 25**

June 26, 2016

Well, by now, June 26, I think we can safely say that the summer season has officially begun! Traffic is picking up in the village, and beyond; the Fourth of July is just a week away; Bentleys and Ferraris have reached dime-a-dozen status; and pedestrian obliviousness has become *the* defining feature of Main Street. Summer is here! And, if you're like me, you're probably reacting to its arrival with a certain amount of ambivalence. I mean, hey, there's always plenty to love about summer, right? Beautiful beaches, wonderful weather, concerts at the park, increased trade for our local business owners, and countless fun events and activities that happen only during this special time of year. Things like these make us *welcome* summer with open hearts, and a joyful spirit.

On the other hand, there's also no shortage of reasons to curse under our breath during the summer, yes? Like that aforementioned traffic... which can turn a simple drive to Amagansett into a scene from Dante's *Descent into Hell*. And the rudeness, impatience, and general up-yours-attitude that permeates the village at this time of year. And the hard to describe, but all too real, feeling that things are just a hair shy of being completely out of control... leaving us with a season-long sense of angst and uneasiness. Things like these make us *count down* the days of summer, and look forward to September... and the welcome return of normalcy to our village and our life.

So, there's always plenty of ups and downs, and joys and frustrations, and highs and lows, during the summer... which makes our Scripture lesson this morning from Paul's letter to the Galatians especially timely and important. Because in this small section of his letter, Paul reminds his friends in Galatia, and also his friends here in Southampton, of some key characteristics and attitudes... for a life of peace and grace, in the midst of a world alive with problems and distractions; like, the Hamptons during the summer season! Paul describes it as “keeping in step with the Spirit...” and we can think of it as “being guided by the Spirit,” in ways that will help us to cope with the challenges of summer. And, Lord knows, we could all use a little help with coping... from now until Labor Day!

Okay, so in our text, Paul lists a series of attitudes, convictions, and characteristics which he calls “the fruit of the Spirit;” and what I want to do with my sermon time is to mention each one in turn with a brief suggestion as to how it might help us to keep our hearts, minds, and behavior focused in a Christ-like direction, as we make our way through the summer of 2016... and thereby, successfully “keep in step with the Spirit” for the next three months.

And the first “fruit of the Spirit” that Paul lifts up is: *love*. Love... well, that makes sense, right? According to Jesus Himself, the two most important things that we are supposed to do as His disciples are to: A) Love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and strength; and, B) Love our neighbor as ourselves. So, for sure, trying to maintain a loving attitude and demeanor through the summer months should be at the top of our personal agendas.

Which, as we know, is often easier said than done. I mean, it's one thing to love God or my wife or my children... but to love the yahoo who just cut me off on Montauk Highway? That's another kettle of fish entirely! So, how then *are* we supposed to manifest love, when we're surrounded by people who on occasion ain't so lovable?

Well, how about this: we can consciously remind ourselves every day, that each and every person we see out there is a soul for whom Jesus died... just as He died for you and me. That idiot, who just gave me the finger because I honked at him for passing me in the bike lane, is a deeply beloved child of Almighty God... for whom Jesus gave His life on the cross. I may not like him, I may think he's a reckless jerk, and I may hope that he gets a big fat ticket... but my Heavenly Father loves him as much as He loves me. And if I can remember that... maybe it will help. So, let's try to *love* our way through the summer!

Next, Paul mentions *joy*; we are supposed to be people of joy. Again, often easier said than done... because some days are hard, and on those days we may not feel very joyful. Well, to have joy in our hearts doesn't mean that we have to be giddy and happy all the time. It doesn't mean that we have to plaster on a fake smile, and act like things couldn't be better in in our lives. It just means that, even in the worst of times, we know and trust that we have a God who loves us, and has promised never to give up on us.

So, when we're feeling particularly frustrated, stressed-out, and overwhelmed with responsibility... let's try to remember that our God still loves us; and that he's given us a beautiful place to live; and that He's assured us that our difficult times won't last forever. In that way, may we try to *rejoice* our way through the summer!

Paul then goes on to lift up *peace*; we are supposed to be people of peace. Well, if there's anything which seems to be in short supply in our world, it's definitely peace. So, it makes a lot of sense that, in order to keep in step with God's Spirit, we should be people who renounce violence... and practice peace.

As we face a summer-full of short tempers, angry comments, and battles over everything from parking spaces to who was first on line... we can make it our priority to be people of calmness, coolness, and peace. Which just might reduce our summer stress a whole lot more than we might think! So, let's be peacemakers this summer... and show our world, through our actions, what it means to be in step with God's Spirit!

Next on Paul's list of fruits of the Spirit is *patience*; as Christian disciples, we should be patient people. Hey, if we focused on only this one particular spiritual fruit this summer... we'd probably all lower our blood pressure and add a couple of years to our life! For the next three months, our village will be the world capitol of impatience and exasperation; so let's be radically counter-cultural... and just relax, go with the flow, and chill out! If we do this, we'll lesson our chances for a stroke... and we'll send an important Christian message to the rest of the village: it's cool, literally, to be a disciple of Jesus! And if you happen to be feeling impatient for this sermon to be over... you can get started on this spiritual fruit right now! Woo-hoo!

Next up we have *kindness*; as Christian disciples, we should be kind to others. This is another particularly good spiritual fruit for us to nurture during the summer; because, as we all know, for the next couple of months acts of kindness on our village roads can seem as elusive as the Loch Ness Monster.

So, summer can be a wonderful time for us to work on being kind to others... even, and *especially*, when others aren't being very kind to us. This is an important detail to keep in mind: that we're supposed to exhibit kindness toward everyone... not just the people who are gracious and magnanimous toward us. It's easy to be kind to the person who says, "No, please, you go ahead!" But it's not so easy to be kind to the guy who blocks your driveway with his Maserati. Well, Jesus taught us not to repay evil for evil... so showering kindness on the grumpy people of the world is a great way for us to grow in our faith!

Next on Paul's list of spiritual fruits is *goodness*; as Christian disciples, we're supposed to be good people. This is a tricky one because, and let's be honest here, most of us would say that, we *are* good people! I mean, it's the rare person who's going to stand up and say, "Hey, you know something? I'm a real jerk!" And I'm not suggesting that we *aren't* good people... I honestly believe that most of the time we really are pretty darn good; we just don't want to take that quality for granted, and act as if goodness is a characteristic that doesn't require our attention and reflection.

Most of the bad things that are done in this world, are done by people who are good most of the time. So we can never be too diligent about embracing the "good," and rejecting the "bad." We are called to do no less, as Christian disciples; and that attitude will serve us well as we make our way through the summer.

Faithfulness is Paul's next spiritual fruit up for consideration. As Christian disciples, we are to be faithful. And I think that this call to be faithful affects us in two different ways. First, and probably most obvious, is the fact that we are supposed to be faithful to God... faithful to our Lord Jesus as we make our way through life. And all of us who are here this morning are expressing that faithfulness by joining together for worship. And that's great! That's important! It's crucial that we don't forsake our relationship with God as we enjoy the blessings of summer!

But beyond that, I think that the faithfulness that's a true fruit of the Spirit, also involves our relationships with one another. We are to be faithful to our families, our friends, our fellow church members, the people with whom we interact as we make our way through life. For me, this means having honor and integrity; it means being a person who is honest and dependable. It means that people can trust us, and believe us when we say something. It means that we'll be loyal to each other, through thick and thin. To be faithful to God, and faithful to each other, is to manifest an important fruit of the Spirit. And that's a good thing to keep in mind as we go through the summer.

Okay, our next to last spiritual fruit on the list, the penultimate spiritual fruit, is *gentleness*; as Christian disciples, we are supposed to be gentle. This is another tricky one, because, as we all know, in our world "gentleness" is often mistaken for "weakness..." and none of us want to appear weak, right? None of us want to be Casper Milquetoast. No, the name of the game for us is strength, and power, and toughness.

Well, there's certainly nothing wrong with being strong and tough; but we also need to keep in mind that "gentleness" and "strength" are by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, many times strength that's administered with an attitude of gentleness, is much more effective than strength that's exercised with yelling, and screaming, and threats. To be gentle is simply to be calm, gracious, and under control. It's to exercise strength and leadership in a way that says, "I respect you; I'm with you; and I'm keeping my composure in the face of challenges and obstacles." This, in fact, is precisely the way in which Jesus Himself exercised His awesome and world-

changing power. And we can do the same. How might summer life in our village improve, if every one of us committed to being 50% more gentle for the next 90 days? We might just be surprised!

Finally, Paul encourages us to avail ourselves of the spiritual fruit of *self-control*; as Christian disciples, we are supposed to exercise self-control. If kindness during the summer can be as rare as the Loch Ness Monster; self-control might be as rare as legitimate photos of Sasquatch. I mean, people flock to the Hamptons for all kinds of reasons during the summer... but the chance to enjoy some meaningful self-control isn't necessarily one of them!

So it becomes all the more important for you and me to set an example of moderation; wisdom; and a willingness to put the needs of others ahead of our own needs. The summer season tempts all of us to eat too much, drink too much, spend too much, and do too much. So a dose of self-control can go a long way toward turning the summer from an exercise in self-indulgence... to the enjoyment of an important spiritual fruit. And that's a good thing for each and every one of us!

So, which of these fruits of the Spirit do we need to grapple with the most this summer? The answer will be different for each of us... but, whatever it is, let's have the courage to do our best address it. And we *will* keep in step with God's Spirit... throughout the summer, and all the days of our lives! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!