

“Ripening Fruit”

Acts 2:1-4, Galatians 4:1-7 [5:16-26]

New Revised Standard Version

Pentecost: the birthday of the church! While today we may like to remember it as a festive celebration, in truth, it was a massive disruption. Even as the disciples had been huddling in the Upper Room waiting for the promised Holy Spirit to arrive, they had no idea how this Spirit would rock their world (as if their world hadn't been rocked enough already!)

In Acts 2 we read, *“On the day of Pentecost they were all together in one place,”* which means yes, they physically were all in one room, but also they were all of the same mindset and after so much change and uncertainty following Jesus crucifixion and resurrection, in this moment, they were “all in agreement that their job was to stick together, to return to the same town, worship in the same temple, keep up the same lease on the same meeting space and begin deliberations about replacing their lost member Judas so

there would be the exactly same number of people in their group.” As Pastor Amy Butler says, *“If only the disciples had known then what we all know now.”*¹ Because despite their best laid plans, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost did not restore order to their lives, it scattered them to the ends of the earth, it challenged the traditions of their upbringing, and upended the law and order of their traditional Jewish faith. If they ever got together in a room again, it would have to be a room far bigger than the upper room – a room large enough to hold countless other people from different places who spoke in different languages and held different beliefs. Because on Pentecost God's Spirit is unleashed in the world in an unruly and undeniably chaotic way. There's nothing you can control about the Holy Spirit.

As someone said, unlike Christmas, the problem with

¹ Amy Butler, “If We Knew Then...” *Ministry Matters* (19 May 2021), accessed on May 23, 2021 at <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10800/if-we->

knew-then-
?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=email_this
&utm_source=email.

Pentecost is not that it's a busy time of the year, but that it unapologetically requires us to carry the gospel out into the world, and blow our own cover. It is one thing to adore the infant Jesus with the rest of the commercial holiday observers in December – we Christians blend right in, but it's a whole other thing, and to many a very scary thing, to proclaim the gospel in every action we take, and to publicly out ourselves as THOSE people, those crazy, “share all your possessions, love your enemy, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, free the captive, Christ-following” people!²

At Christmas we buy the gifts we want and give them to the people we want, but on Pentecost we're asked to take the gifts God has given us and share them with whoever God puts in our path. If Christmas is a holiday or vacation from our life, Pentecost is a pink slip – asking us to leave the life we have known, for the unknown task of spreading God's love to

the ends of the earth. Or as Danielle Shroyer says, *“Without Pentecost, we'd just be people who tell Jesus' story. With Pentecost, we're people who live into Jesus' story.”*³

This is what Paul is trying to help his people do in Galatia – live into Jesus' story by realizing, once again, that they are not subject to the law as an exclusionary source of access to God, but rather, they are free in Christ.

Now remember, Paul is writing to a people who understand what it means to not be free, whether that is the Jews, whose ancestors were enslaved in Egypt and later held captive in Babylon during the exile, or whether that is the various Jewish and Gentile peoples living under the oppressive regime of the Roman Empire.

We've seen this type of oppressive power, yet again in recent days, as Jews, Muslims, and Christians have been killed by the conflict in the Middle

² Rev. Eric C. Fistler & Rev. Robb A. McCoy, “NL 346: Pentecost - Acts 2:1-4 & Galatians 4:1-7; 5:16-26,” *Pulpit Fiction Podcast* (23 May 2021), accessed on

May 23, 2021 at <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/narrative-notes/3-46>.

³ Fistler & McCoy, *ibid*.

East. People in Gaza and other areas of Palestine live in an oppressed state – continually – they are not free. They cannot leave the city without going through extensive checkpoints. They lack water, food, electricity, and everyday resources while just a handful of miles away those things are in plenty. If you’ve traveled to the Holy Land you know the stark contrast of seeing a land that looks like a 1st world country out of the left window of your tour bus and a land that looks like a 3rd world country out of the right window of your tour bus. This economic disparity is devastating – to *all* who live there. And of course, oppression often leads to violence when it seems to be the only way to have the world listen to your pleas. To be against the oppressor in Israel is not to be against Jews, it is to be against militarized power that secures life for some while sanctioning and subjugating life for others. And all the hate we are seeing – all the anti-semitism and islamophobia and persecution of Palestinian

Christians, I believe it breaks God’s heart.

And so since the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost *in Jerusalem* – it would be good for us to remember our siblings who reside there today – Christians, Muslims, Jews – Palestinians, Israelis, Ethiopians, Americans, people from all over the world – and to remember that when the Spirit came at Pentecost it enabled everyone hear the story of God in their own tongue, their own language and to embody the story in their own tradition. .

There are many things to hold in tension in the Holy Land, just as there are in the United States. Land that was stolen from one group becomes the land that gives opportunity, even safety, to another. It is a familiar story across our globe. And yet it is a story that the Holy Spirit comes to disrupt on Pentecost. To turn upside down. The Spirit at Pentecost rushes in and sweeps over all the people – the Spirit sweeps over borders and past check points and sweeps through

those who are in poor and those in power, those who are Jews and those who are Gentiles. Male and female. Slave and Free.

The Spirit of Pentecost does not let the words uttered by George Floyd one year ago on Tuesday, “I can’t breathe” die out or fade away, but the Spirit of Pentecost keeps giving breath to a movement that will not stop until the suffocation and suppression stops.

The Spirit, just like wind, does not discriminate – when it blows –it blows through everyone and every place – burning and refining what needs to go and putting the wind beneath the wings of that which needs to soar. The Spirit of Pentecost is unstoppable. Unruly. Undignified. Chaotic and carefree and it travels, uninhibited through all lands.

And again, this is what Paul is reiterating to the Gentiles today as he reminds them that they are not only children of God,

but heirs of God’s kin-dom. What does this mean?

Well, with Christ’s death and resurrection, a new chapter has begun, which Paul describes using the analogy of children and grownups. “A child may be an heir, but until that child comes of age, the inheritance may as well belong to someone else. ‘Guardians and trustees’ are responsible both for the inheritance and the heir.

Before the inheriting child comes of age, an heir is indistinguishable from anyone else. *After* the child comes of age, they own and control all the property they have inherited. This difference between *before* and *after* is dramatic. Similarly dramatic is the difference between the Galatians’ identity *before* God sent the Spirit of the Son into their hearts, and *after*.⁴

So with that analogy in mind, Paul says – we are all living in the “after”; we are *all* heirs. We have our inheritance in Christ, if you will, we are free from the

⁴ Mary Hinkle Shore, “Commentary on Acts 2:1-4; Galatians 4:1-7 and/or Galatians 5:16-26,” *Working Preacher* (4 June 2017), accessed on May 23, 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/pentecost/commentary-on-acts-21-4-galatians-41-7-516-26>.

legality of law – which doesn't mean we are free to do whatever we are want, it means, we are free to live in a Spirit-led way.

So then in chapter 5 when Paul talks about the desires of the flesh as opposed to those of the Spirit, the choice that Paul presents is not “holiness” versus “sinfulness” or “abstinence versus indulgence.” That is our modern lens that we like to put on this text. In reality, Paul is presenting a choice between *selfishness* and *selflessness*. Love, which is living by the Spirit, is motivated by the well-being of others. “The flesh” is motivated by *only* my own well-being,⁵ or more accurately the illusion of my own well-being.

Because all the “works of the flesh” that Paul mentions are rooted in actions that often involve comparing and contrasting one's life with others (envy, strife, jealousy, quarrels) OR they're behaviors

that allow one to numb out so you don't have to truly pay attention to the feelings or actions of your life that you are having (being intimate outside consensual boundaries or relationship, drinking alcohol until you are blitzed, dividing into factions so that you are only with those you agree with).

And so, of course, Paul says these are NOT the things that give you life, in fact, they take life away – they are another form of bondage or enslavement.

So then, what gives life? What *does* freedom in the Spirit look like? Well, it looks like the fruit of the Spirit – and this fruit has nine different flavors – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. There is no law against such things, Paul says because they are not things that can be legislated.⁶ They flow from within, they cannot be enforced from

⁵ Fistler & McCoy, *ibid*.

⁶ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, “NL Podcast 456: Pentecost - Gifts of the Spirit - May 23, 2021,” *Working Preacher* (16 May

2021), accessed on May 23, 2021 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/456-pentecost-gifts-of-the-spirit-may-23-2021>.

without. No one can force you to have love or joy or generosity. Of course you can try to fake these externally to please others, but while outward expression may be able to be faked, the inward reality and motivation cannot.

Based on their Greek roots, these nine attributes of the Fruit of the Spirit can be defined as follows:⁷

Love: anything self-giving; that meets the needs of others.

Joy: the experience of gladness based not on situational circumstances, but on an ongoing relationship or satisfaction with the divine.

Peace: a sense of *shalom*, or completion, wholeness and unity, of restored relationship. It connotes not just peace, but also prosperity, wellness, health, completeness, safety.

Patience: Ability to suffer trouble (situational or relational) without blowing up or giving up. It requires endurance and perseverance.

Kindness: The basic idea of "usefulness, helpfulness." Helping someone in a concrete, tangible way, not just in a theoretical sweetness of personality.

Generosity: is interest in the welfare of others.

Faithfulness: someone who is trustworthy, reliable, committed.

Gentleness: humility, meekness, not being overly impressed by yourself.

Self-control: Ability to choose the important over the urgent. Temperance or restraint of one's immediate impulses.

Now even though you may have heard these nine attributes described as the “FruitS of the Spirit” before (plural) – both the Greek noun for “fruit” and the Greek verb (“is”) are singular. Why does thinking of the fruit of the Spirit as singular rather than plural matter? Because often we confuse these nine aspects of the Fruit of the Spirit with the many different

⁷ Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, “The Spirit and Character (Galatians 5:22-26),” *Jesus Walk Bible Studies* (2021),

accessed on May 23, 2021 at jesuswalk.com/galatians/8_fruit.htm.

spiritual gifts we have, saying some people have gentleness and others have generosity. Or some people are faithful and others are patient. We ask, which one of these nine things am I already naturally good at and which ones do I need to work harder on? And which ones of these do I NOT need to worry about because they are just not “my thing” and someone else in the “Body” will take care of it!

But this line of thinking misses the point altogether. We cannot work on these things as separate achievements like we can work on a spiritual gift of teaching or listening. These are not singular achievements, they are intertwined attitudes that grow within us over time as we center ourselves in Christ and model our life after Jesus’ life and allow the Spirit to guide us. When we live in the Spirit, we have this fruit – this one fruit – that manifests in nine beautiful ways, or perhaps we could say through nine different textures or flavors.

But if it IS easier for you to think of “fruit” as plural – then think of it like the big “tutti frutti” hat that Carmen Miranda



Carmen Miranda in *The Gang's All Here* (1943 film)

wore in *The Gang's All Here*, that later inspired the fruit hat logo of

Chiquita bananas. Each individual fruit in that hat representing one of the 9 attributes of the Spirit. When you have that hat on, you always carry all nine of those fruits on your head. They function as one unit; they cannot be separated; they are sewn together!

So it is with the Spirit of God. It's not that some of us have the capability of being generous more so than others, or that some of us are patient and others of us are peaceful. When we are living in Christ, we *all* have *all* of these things within us. They are part of our God-given created capabilities. We do not work on them like a

check list of self-help “to-dos”
– we *live into them* like
breathing in the air around us,
expanding our lung capacity to
inhale and exhale deeper
breaths with them, until their
full aromas are released.

Now of course, some of us
might reveal more patience
than others, or might appear
more kind or more loving than
others. And I think that’s
because, with fruit, there are all
different stages of
development. This is why both
Jesus and Paul use the
metaphor of fruit so often when
talking about the life of faith.
Fruit doesn’t develop
immediately. Going from seed
in the ground to juicy red apple
ready to eat – is quite a long
process! And carrying this
forward as a metaphor for our
spiritual lives, we are all in
different stages of our fruit-of-
the-Spirit fruit-ripening
process.

We’re getting to that time of
year where many of our
favorite summer fruits are
really yummy. In fact, just
yesterday Damon told me one

of the jokes he starts to make at
True Food Kitchen this time of
year when a customer orders a
drink or salad that has melon in
it. “***What will your honey do if
she can’t elope?***” I know, I
know, cringeworthy. But in
thinking about honeydews and
cantaloupes and any kind of
fruit really – one of the big
things is how to tell if the fruit
is ripe and ready to eat, right?

Unripe fruit is often green,
sour, odorless, hard, and mealy.
The ripening process makes the
fruit more appealing – the color
of the skin changes as
chlorophyll (the green stuff in
plants) is broken down and in
some cases new pigments are
made, the acids that make the
fruit sour are broken down, the
mealy starches are converted
into yummy sugar, the hard
pectin walls are broken down
and softened so you can bite
into the fruit more easily. And
Voila! You have a soft, juicy,
sweet, fragrant, colorful fruit

that attracts animals and humans alike!⁸

But did you know that this fruit ripening process – is accomplished by a group of enzymes that are made on cue? They take their cue from a ripening signal – a burst of a gas called *ethylene*. Ethylene is a simple hydrocarbon gas that flips the switch to trigger the genes that in turn make the enzymes that cause the ripening. Ethylene is produced by rapidly growing tissue (the tips of roots, flowers, other ripening fruit, or even damaged tissue). Thus, a wound can activate ethylene production; just the act of picking green fruit of the tree can cause the ripening process to begin.⁹

So by controlling the ethylene signal, fruit producers can put perfectly ripe, beautifully colored fruit in the produce section of our grocery store. Bananas can be shipped green (to save on bruising) then put in a “ripening room” where a low

concentration of ethylene is applied to ignite the ripening process. Bananas are one of the highest producers of ethylene, so here’s a trick: if you have an unripe avocado you need ripe; put it in a brown bag with a banana and the banana will emit and share its ethylene with the avocado – making it ready to eat.¹⁰ Pretty cool!

Essentially, ethylene causes ripening and ripening is the process in fruit that causes it to become more palatable – the fruit becomes sweeter, more colorful, and softer...less green and more mature.

Do you see the metaphor for our lives when it comes to the Fruit of the Spirit? Think of the ethylene gas as the Holy Spirit or the “ripening agent” for us to grow into the flavors and softness of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, which are already inside of us from day one when are created...sometimes they

⁸ Jennifer Nemec, “What Makes Fruit Ripen?”, *Grit: Rural American Know-How* (10 June 2020), accessed on May 23, 2021 at

<https://www.grit.com/departments/what-makes-fruit-ripen/>.

⁹ Nemec, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Nemec, *ibid.*

just need to be ignited or woken up. And the Spirit can be woken up by our internal wounds or by external agents and a bunch of other things in between.

Now, if you are sitting here feeling like rather unripe fruit, or rather are new in your ripening of the fruit of the Spirit, find someone who is a bit more ripe than you – that sounds weird I know, but hang around them – and maybe your fruit will begin to ripen as well. Search out someone who exudes the full nine flavors of the Fruit of the Spirit (or at least 5 or more of them) and let their ethylene/Holy Spirit do some emitting while you do some absorbing.

Because like ethylene – the Holy Spirit is a contagious ripening agent. It spreads from person to person, blowing through communities to transform us all into the Fruit that we need to be to effect change in the world and to live more centered, Spirit-filled lives. It's like the Holy Spirit is what makes the gospel more

palatable to a bunch of different taste buds – not because it makes the gospel taste good or be easy to swallow – but because the Spirit allows the gospel message to be ripened in a bunch of different countries, places, and through all kinds of people with different perspectives, and pallets.

So this Pentecost, add ethylene to your metaphors of the Holy Spirit – just as wind blows, and flames ignite, and a dove alights – ethylene ripens. And if there is one thing that the world needs right now – it is ripe fruit of the Spirit – fruit that is ready to be shared and enjoyed – not still sour and hard and closed off from growth.

What would the world look like and feel like, if the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control were fully unleashed? What would YOUR life taste like if these flavors of the Fruit of the Spirit were all in their full, ripened glory?

Probably pretty sweet. Amen.