

August 31st: Gardening Together

Welcome, my friends, to the final Sunday in our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit—this has been a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. Now that we've studied all nine fruits together and taken a look at what it means to remain connected to Jesus, we'll be concluding this series with a final word of inspiration rooted in the wisdom of one of our spiritual forefathers, John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist tradition. Whether you've been here for one Sunday or all of them, thank you for continuing to walk with us on this journey and I hope that something resonates with you so that you can begin a new week with fresh insight.

Before we dive in, let's pray.

God our Gardener, the wisdom of your holy scripture invites us into deep community, and here in this sacred space, we find the connection and hope that we are longing for. As we labor together to grow these fruits of the spirit and bring healing to our world, strengthen us and nourish us for this holy work. Remind us that we are better when we're together, and encourage us to see past our differences so that we can honor the inherent value and divine spirit inside each of your beloved children. Empower us to work together for your glory and our neighbor's good. Amen.

While I was home in New England for my summer vacation, I went for an early morning walk with a family member, on a path that winds through a cute little downtown area and continues on an old bridge that spans the Farmington River, which flows through an ancient valley in central Connecticut. When I was growing up, the bridge was decrepit—the paint chipping away piece by piece, rotten wooden floorboards creaking under the slightest pressure, and rust collecting on all of the metal tresses. But recently, the town decided that a little repair was in order, and over the course of a few years, the bridge was transformed into a beautiful landmark that welcomes bike riders and joggers to the neighborhood.

Now the Drake Hill Flower Bridge is fully restored, part of the National Register of Historic Places, covered in baskets of flowers, and the perfect spot to take a cup of coffee and a treat from the bakery down the street. Which is exactly what my family member and I did. We powerwalked down the path, coffees in hand, and arrived at the bridge in time to see all of the baskets in bloom—the early morning light dancing off the brightly colored petals and newly erupted buds. It looked like this—and although these photos don't do it justice, you'll have to trust me that it was a glorious sight, which made up for the fact that I'm definitely not a morning person.

It turns out that we also arrived right on time for the bridge's daily pruning—a handful of volunteers were stationed at various points around the bridge with gardening tools and watering cans, carefully tending each group of flowers. Some were up on ladders, some were elbows deep in dirt, and some were waving at passersby and smiling. And you could tell that they were a dedicated team of people, they knew which flowers to trim, which to dig up and move to a sunnier spot, which were ready to clip and be put into a summer bouquet. They moved in tandem all over the bridge, little by little taking care of such a lovely place.

As we took in this scene, my family member and I remarked that this reminded us of my grandmother and her garden club, who lovingly maintained the plants that decorated their downtown bridge in small town New Hampshire. Like this group of volunteers, they pruned and weeded and transplanted almost every day, turning a potential community eyesore into a beautiful landscape. For her and her friends, it was a labor of love, a way for them to bring a little touch of hope and charm to their little hamlet. And it worked—just like the flower bridge near my hometown, I always looked forward to crossing that bridge when our car finally drove up the hill towards their lake house. It brought me joy to know that we passed those flowers, we were that much closer to jumping into the cool lake and watching the sunset on the porch.

I mentioned my grandmother's love for gardening in our introduction to this series, and her voice is one that I've come back to as we've navigated this topic. And as we prepare to close out this summer and move forward into a new season, I wondered what she might say about how to wrap up our discussion on spiritual fruit. And what I came up with kept bringing me back to the volunteers on the bridge that I encountered on vacation.

I won't deny that gardening can be a fun solo hobby. It can be meditative to get your hands dirty. You can get so into it that hours can pass by while you dig, plant, and water. And that feeling when you look up from your work and see progress? That's priceless. My grandmother loved to spend her afternoons immersed in her own little world, and she loved to see the end results of her hard work.

But sometimes gardening our own little patch of dirt helps us notice other places in our communities that could use a little love. Sometimes, when we've watered our own little patch of grass, we see other places where the grass has yellowed. Sometimes when we tend our own backyard garden, we get into a conversation with a neighbor that is looking to plant their own—and we can give tips and tricks that might help them get started.

Gardening is an act that brings people together—and not just because it's fun to compare our latest blooms or share in our harvests. Gardening together is an act of solidarity, whether we know it or not. When our hands dig into the same earth, and we pull out the same weeds, it reminds us that we're a part of something bigger than ourselves. When we're feeling the same dirt beneath our feet, or pruning the same flowers, we affirm our commitment to care for the creation we hold in common, the environment which sustains all of human and earthly life. When we're washing the vegetables that have grown to make a stew for a loved one, or when we're building a fresh bouquet to give to a friend, we proclaim that the gifts of this labor are not for our own enrichment, but given to us so that we can nourish each other.

Gardening together teaches us we have an enormous potential to make a difference in our communities, because we can literally grow them from the ground up. It reminds us that we each have a role to play in shaping our cities and towns into the world that we want to live in—we play an active role in creating beauty, caring for each other, and providing for the next generation.

I think this applies to our spiritual growth, as well, and the fruits of the spirit that we've been trying to cultivate this summer. This action, small though it may be, is part of a bigger effort by the Holy Spirit and Christians all around the world to bring about a new reality—the Kingdom of God. By growing in our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control, we communicate to each other that we're willing to labor toward a better, more just, more wholesome environment for everyone—we're willing to put in the work to bring about a world in which all of creation can thrive. It tells our communities that we aren't so concerned about this future spiritual reality, that we neglect our current reality and all the challenges that come with it. It tells our fellow humans that our faith isn't simply about getting to a far off place called heaven, it's about creating heaven here and now.

You might be thinking that this sounds lofty or straight up impossible, but our spiritual ancestors, the fathers and mothers of our faith, have always believed in this task. They've always trusted that their small actions have contributed to this coming reality. They gardened together in their own time, carefully pruning and weeding their own lives and communities, and now, they have passed down this sacred work to us.

What would they say about what we've learned this summer? What would they think of our efforts to grow in our capacity to bear spiritual fruit? Well, this past week I was reminded of a quote by John Wesley, one of the leaders of a spiritual revival in England, and a powerful figure in the First Great Awakening, which was primarily located in the American south and west.

In a sermon that focused on attuning our minds to the universal Spirit, Wesley invited his audience into a greater understanding of Christian

solidarity—solidarity which moves us towards love for each other and positive action in our world. As he talked about how we can do this, he wrote, "If your heart is as my heart, take my hand." Some later Methodist leaders have rewritten it just slightly into "If your heart is like mine, take my hand."

Some of you long time Bible readers might know that this wording isn't original to Wesley, it's actually drawn from a story in 2 Kings 10, but what I find most interesting is that this invitation has developed into a more modern idea that some Wesleyan scholars call "likeheartedness." As a compound, kinda made up word, likeheartedness refers to a state of being in which our hearts are joined together with the hearts of other people, tied together by the same virtues, passions, and character. Likeheartedness doesn't have to mean that we are exactly the same people—we can be diverse in age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, or any other cultural marker—but it does mean that we are united by this vision of how we want the world to be.

When our hearts are like each other, we can embody the same spiritual qualities and take action towards the same causes, because we are moved by the same things and care about the same injustices. When we are likehearted, our hearts beat to the same spiritual rhythm, and our hearts respond in unison because of the brokenness that we encounter. When our hearts feel, love, and even break as one, we have an enormous capacity for transformation—not just for ourselves, but for entire neighborhoods, cities and nations. How much faster would we solve food insecurity if all of our hearts hated to see people go hungry? How much quicker would we end our wars, if all of our hearts despised violence? How much more willing would we be to create affordable housing, if all of our hearts prioritized safety and security instead of corporate greed? How many more people could be impacted by lifesaving healthcare, if all of our hearts fought for the healing that our bodies and minds deserve?

I think "likeheartedness" is the whole point of spiritual community—whether that's a formal congregation or close friendships that support our individual faith. If Wesley were to look at us now, I think he would be asking, has this

study of scripture made us more likehearted with each other? As a church, have we grown in likeheartedness?

Only you can answer for yourself, but for me, I hope my heart has grown to be more like Wesley's: bold, prophetic, and passionate. I hope my heart has grown to be more like my grandmother's: generous, adventurous, and creative. I hope my heart has grown to be more like all of yours. And even though this series is over, I don't think our efforts to grow in likeheartedness should come to an end. I think moving towards likeheartedness is something we should continue to aim for as a community. As we enter a new season, with all the fresh starts and unforeseen obstacles that it might entail, let's remind ourselves that cultivating and sharing in our spiritual fruit is, and will always be, a powerful act of solidarity and hope.

If your heart is like mine, my friends, take my hand, and let's garden together for the rest of our lives.

Amen.