

June 22nd: The Fruit of Love

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit–this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. Starting this week, we'll be looking at one fruit per Sunday, all with the goal of offering some practical ways for you to grow in your faith and respond to our broken world. Today we're studying the fruit of love–and learning about what love can do in our communities. So we're glad you've joined us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next few months.

Before we begin this discussion on love, let's take a moment to pray together.

Holy Love, before we even existed, you loved all of creation. Since the very beginning, you have loved each soul, because you shaped us from the dust of the earth and breathed life into our lungs. These divine origins have created within us a sacred capacity for love–we carry your love with us in this world in every situation and every moment. In this time of reflection, grant us wisdom about how to be bearers of this love in our broken communities. Help us to steward this love well, and to honor all other souls who also carry your tenderness within them. Through your guidance and power, we commit ourselves to spreading your compassion and grace as we enter a new week. Amen.

It was about this time about 25 years ago, when I came home from elementary school ready to start summer vacation. I raced off the bus, up my driveway, and into my house–ripping the shoes off my feet, depositing my backpack on the bench in our mudroom, and then launching myself onto the couch for a well deserved break. There's really nothing like summer break after a long school year, and I fully leaned into this feeling of no responsibilities, no routines, and no early mornings. This was all well and good for a few days and even a few weeks, until my family started to notice that something...smelled. If you're a parent of elementary aged kids, maybe you know where this is going, but for everyone else, I'll tell you what happened.

That backpack that I dumped on the bench and promptly forgot about? Well, it contained my lunch box...and the remnants of a lunch from that final day of school. And inside that lunchbox was a tupperware container with the now liquified remains of what used to be a delicious early summer watermelon. When my mom finally discovered that the smell that permeated our house was coming from my discarded backpack, she made me pull out every single item—the notebooks, the pens, the summer assignments—until we found my lunchbox, buried at the bottom. As soon as my fingers touched the lunchbox, and felt that the nylon was wet and sticky, I almost vomited. I don't know if you've ever smelled watermelon that's been left inside of a backpack for a few weeks, but it's not good. It smelled sickly and rotten, like something died, it was that bad.

But still, my mom made me pull out the soggy and stinky lunchbox, and she lectured me about how my things were my responsibility, and we both gagged as I stood over the sink and cleaned out the rotten watermelon, and she supervised the process. We had to throw out the lunchbox entirely, because the smell would just not go away, and it took me a LONG time before I was able to stomach the sight and taste of watermelon again. Even now, if a watermelon is a day past ripe, I can tell, and I will not go anywhere near it.

Here's the thing about rotten fruit: it doesn't just smell bad, it's actually dangerous. If rotten fruit is consumed, the bacteria that has built up inside of it can cause stomach upset, food poisoning, or serious illness. It can be toxic to our bodies, and do long term harm to us. And the same is true of bad spiritual fruit, it can be toxic to our souls. Rotten spiritual fruit can do long term harm to ourselves and others—and not just in ways we can see, hear, smell, and touch, but in invisible ways too.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives a warning about this bad spiritual fruit, saying to his disciples and a larger crowd: "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briers. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil

things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

With this in mind, it’s easy to see why the Apostle Paul seems so eager to tell the early Church about producing good fruit—and in this discussion about fruits of the spirit in the letter to Galatians, Paul immediately jumps into telling these new Christians what it means to live out their lives as true disciples of Jesus. Right off the bat, earlier in chapter 5, he tells the early church that loving their neighbors is one of the highest callings of any Christian. Loving each other as we love ourselves is not only central to the work of the gospel, it is absolutely critical. Love is the foundation for everything that Jesus did, and so love should be the foundation for everything we do. And so it’s no surprise that love is the first fruit that Paul lists in our passage.

However, I think we’ve gotten the wrong idea about love. I think a lot of us are used to imagining love as a feeling—the butterflies in our stomach kind of love. Our culture really sells this idea of love to us through movies, music, and romantic expectations, and so many of us, whether we know it or not, have this mental image of love that is essentially an emotion. And like all emotions, love can be fleeting—it can be here one day and gone the next.

Despite this modern understanding, I think Paul has a different perspective. In Koine Greek—the language of our New Testament, there are at least three different words that we translate as “love.” There’s “eros,” which is often used to describe passionate, romantic love, “phillia,” which is used to describe a kind of platonic, familial love, and then there’s “agape,” the kind of love that we find in this passage.

Agape is used throughout our scriptures to refer to a love that is deep, unconditional, and selfless. It’s often the word chosen to describe God’s love towards humanity, although God does feel this love as an emotion, agape always refers to a type of emotion that results in action. Agape is an intentional choice, a deliberate decision to act on behalf of others, seeking

their wellbeing, and serving them with expectations of receiving anything in return. Agape is a way of treating people that goes beyond how we feel in the moment—it's a love that is modeled for us by Jesus. In each of the four gospels, we see Jesus display this kind of love by welcoming people, healing them, and releasing them from harmful situations. He lays his hands on them, embraces them, and sees their true value and dignity. And so in his letter to the Galatians, Paul wants us to know that this agape love is visible, tangible, something that we experience with all of our senses.

This agape love is deeply connected to our own relationship to God, because when we truly understand our own belovedness, and we trust that God loves us, it becomes easier to see other people as other recipients of this divine care and compassion. When we see ourselves the way God sees us, we can see other people with that same love and desire for connection. And because we've been filled with agape, we can extend the same kind of selfless, unconditional love—we can choose to love others the way God has loved us.

The only question is, are we good at this kind of love? And what I mean by that is: Have we practiced this kind of love as part of our faith journey? Are we making this choice to love as Jesus' modern day disciples? Is the church succeeding at showing this agape to people in our communities? Are we bearing this fruit?

I think the answer is yes, and also, no. Let me explain.

On an individual level, I think you all are lovely, caring people—devoted to friends and family, active in causes that you care about, and working towards justice in our city and nation. I know that each of you are willing to sacrifice for the people you love, and you are generous with your time and energy when it comes to meeting the needs of others. But I think this agape love is a little more challenging when it comes to our collective action—and it's something that I see the capital "C" church struggling with right now.

Three weeks ago, I finished a book called *Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters*—and since the last page, I’ve had all these thoughts swirling around my head. The author, a longtime religion researcher and writer, shares his observations about the major shifts that are occurring in all Christian denominations—and the trends that are impacting church attendance, local missions, and the reputation of the Church in our larger culture.

In one of the chapters, he interviews a number of people who have been turned off or turned away from the church. In these conversations, he starts to hear common threads, like the feeling that churches are increasingly judgemental towards people who don’t think or act the same way as they do. And that when individuals do attempt to attend a new church or make connections with members, they often leave feeling unseen or unsupported. There’s even a woman who describes her experiences with a local congregation, saying, “they just don’t love us anymore.”

And I’ve heard it from my peers too, everyone from millennials to Gen X to Gen Z—there’s a prevailing sentiment in our culture right now that church is not a safe space for people who don’t fit a certain mold. There’s even a saying that has caught on in some online spaces, it goes, “There’s no hate like Christian love.” I’ve heard this used when someone talked about being rejected by family when coming out as queer, or when someone experienced racism in a church setting, or when someone felt uncomfortable with a religious group’s endorsement of authoritarian figures or support for policies that dehumanize our fellow citizens.

“There’s no hate like Christian love.”

Ouch, right? I had a visceral reaction to this saying the right time I heard it, because it stung to hear. I thought to myself, “How can people say that? That can’t possibly be true for all Christians or all churches! Our church is open and affirming, and a safe place for queer folks and people of all demographics, surely we are different!” And we might be—but the larger truth is that so many

other churches are not. The reality is that there are many people in our communities who have had a negative experience with Christians, they don't experience church as loving at all. There are many individuals in our towns and cities that have left church or left faith altogether because they no longer are willing to receive this so-called love when all it does is fill them with shame, frustration, anger, or hopelessness. To them, Christian love is rotten fruit.

I think this reality begs some important questions for the church, both the larger institutions and the local congregations.

Starting with: how do we change this? What can we do in our own neighborhood to shift this cultural narrative? What tangible actions can we take this week to demonstrate the kind of love that is truly unconditional, selfless, and without judgment?

I think this is an opportunity for us as disciples of Jesus to wonder: What does deep agape love really look like in our context? What does real, divine love feel like for our neighbors? What does love for the people of Bremerton sound like in practice? Have we asked them:

If you were lost, or lonely, or were struggling through life's inevitable challenges, how would you want to be loved?

If you were in pain, how would you want to be loved?

If you were in poverty, how would you want to be loved?

If you were in the grip of addiction, how would you want to be loved?

If you were dealing with depression, how would you want to be loved?

I know this is a lot of questions—but I hope that even just one of them sparks something inside of you this week. As you think about your routines and schedule, maybe one of these questions will help you identify a way that you want to show love to someone you encounter. As you make a deliberate choice to demonstrate love this week, maybe these questions will help you identify a new action to take, or a new way you can serve. Or if you're stuck,

and wondering how to get started, here is another perspective. Philosopher and public intellectual Dr. Cornel West says, “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.”

And so this week, I challenge all of us to be intentional about our agape love: a love that moves us towards justice, holds us with tenderness, and reminds us that we are deeply beloved by our Creator. Let’s be intentional with our actions, day by day, week by week, and year by year.

I’ll close with this:

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, wrote this in a April 1948 piece for the Catholic Worker newspaper, “Whenever I groan within myself and think how hard it is to keep writing about love in these times of tension and strife which may, at any moment, become for us all a time of terror, I think to myself: What else is the world interested in? What else do we all want, each one of us, except to love and be loved, in our families, in our work, in all our relationships? God is Love. Love casts out fear. Even the most ardent revolutionist, seeking to change the world, to overturn the tables of the money changers, is trying to make a world where it is easier for people to love, to stand in that relationship to each other... There can never be enough of it.”

I love that last little phrase, “There can never be enough of it.”

My friends, love is the first of these fruits of the spirit, and the foundation for the rest. There is already enough hatred, and violence, and judgement in our world, but there is never enough love—so let’s choose to be examples of divine love this week. Let’s make the choice to bear good fruit for our community, and leave the rotten fruit for those forgotten lunchboxes.

Amen.