

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/12/2014, Midweek Lent 1  
The First Fruit of the Spirit: Love  
Galatians 5:13-26, 1 John 4:7-8, John 14:15-20

### PRAYER OF THE DAY

☐ Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

*[Note from Pastor Fryer: As I read aloud my Bible texts, please try to note the mention of the Spirit and of love. These two go together.]*

### FIRST LESSON..... Galatians 5:13-26, NRSV

<sup>13</sup>For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup>If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

<sup>16</sup>Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup>By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup>And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup>If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. <sup>26</sup>Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

### SECOND LESSON..... 1 John 4:7-8, KJV

<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. <sup>8</sup>He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

HOLY GOSPEL ..... John 14:15-20, RSV

<sup>5</sup>“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup>And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, <sup>17</sup>even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

<sup>8</sup>“I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup>Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. <sup>20</sup>In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

HYMN LBW 315      *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus says this to his disciples, and through them, to us:

<sup>16</sup>I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, <sup>17</sup>even the Spirit of truth...  
(John 14:16-17, RSV)

My sermon this evening is on the first fruit of the Spirit: love. But before I turn to that, let me begin with some words of the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon. His words are a lament on the tendency of Christians to forget the Third Person of the Holy Trinity: the Holy Spirit. Spurgeon says this about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

O brethren, it is wonderful that this blessed Spirit should not leave us in indignation; we lodge him so ill, we honor him so little. He receives so little of our affectionate worship that he might well say, “I will no longer abide with you.” ...It is matchless love which has caused the Holy Spirit to bear with our ill manners, and bear our vexatious behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Alas, I believe that Spurgeon is quite right in his lament. All Bible-believing Christians believe in the Holy Spirit, yet some of us hardly know what to make of him. Furthermore, all Christians in the Great Tradition of the Church believe that we ourselves received the Holy Spirit when we were baptized. We have beheld that divine anointing with the Holy Spirit many times here at Immanuel. As soon as the baby comes up from the font, or the adult comes up from the font, I almost rush to the prayer for the Spirit. I lay my hands on the head of the newly baptized one and pray the ancient prayer of Confirmation. We did it most recently for Christine and Eric Rock’s daughter, Catherine. The prayer goes this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “The First Fruit of the Spirit,” May 25, 1884.

God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we give you thanks for freeing your sons and daughters from the power of sin and for raising them up to a new life through this holy sacrament. *Pour your Holy Spirit upon Catherine:* the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence. Amen.

Substitute your own name here and marvel at the sacred mystery that has taken place in your life: Pour your Holy Spirit upon... Gregory, Davida, Gwendolyn, and each of us here who has been baptized. And if you are not yet baptized, but would love to be, be pleased to know that the Holy Spirit is longing to be poured out upon you too.

Saint John's saying about the indwelling of God in believers is fulfilled in one believer after another. It is fulfilled in you and in me:

<sup>8</sup>“I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup>Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. <sup>20</sup>In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and *I in you.*” (John 14:8, RSV)

Astonishing and mysterious things have happened to us, one by one. But what are we to make of them? Jesus promises to send a “Counselor,” a “Comforter,” “the Spirit of truth.” He has so sent that Counselor, Comforter, and Spirit of truth into us. What shall we make of this anointing in our lives? How shall we show it proper honor and let it take shape in the conduct of our lives?

Now, let's turn to this evening's text from Galatians 5 about the “fruit of the Spirit.” I cherish this text, and I hope that you will too, because it helps explain in concrete ways what it means that Christ and the Holy Spirit dwell in us.

According to Saint Paul, the Spirit produces fruit. The apostle gives a beautiful list of them:

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control.  
(Galatians 5:22-23, NRSV)

Maybe it would be good to begin the discussion of the fruit of the Spirit with a simple horticultural observation: If a tree is prevented from producing its fruit, that tree does not flourish. If it is constrained in what is natural and appointed for it, then it becomes a puzzle on earth.

Jesus met such a tree once and was quite frustrated with it:

<sup>19</sup>And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away. <sup>20</sup>And when the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away! (Matthew 21:19-20, KJV)

This tree did not fare well. It had an end, a purpose in life, but it failed in its purpose, which was annoying to its Maker.

Likewise, the Spirit, Saint Paul says, produces fruit — the first of which is love. Because the baptized have the Spirit, it is natural and appropriate for us, then, to produce fruit, starting with love, lest we disappoint the Holy Spirit within us. We do not want to render ourselves malformed beings, like fig trees without figs. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon us in baptism. The best path for us henceforth is that we produce the natural fruit of the Spirit, beginning with love.

## LOVE

Now we come to our subject: love. Let's begin by noting the tremendous optimism of Christianity concerning the human race. We believe that human beings are built for love. A critic of humanity might suppose that there are people who have no love in them, or even that there are lots of such people, but the Church disagrees. Whether you are talking about Christians or pagans or atheists or whomever, if you are talking about a human being, you are talking about someone built for love.

The commandments to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves are alien to no human heart. "For what can be known about God is plain to them..." (Romans 1:19, RSV) says Saint Paul, and a chief thing that can be known about God is that he asks us to love our neighbor. The conscience will always prick us if we turn from love to murder, betrayal, slander, robbery, adultery, or countless other ways to hurt our neighbor or break his heart. And if we have so dulled our conscience that it no longer hurts us, then in like measure we have diminished our own humanity.

If we were to encounter someone who had no drop of love or human kindness in him, we would inevitably count that person to be deformed and much to be pitied. We would wonder what in the world had happened to that person as a child or along the path of life that he had ended up so strange, so inhumane. Indeed, a being with no inclination to love is a devil, not a human. Satan and his miserable host have not a drop of sympathy or fellow-feeling for humanity. If we were to encounter one of our own kind with no inclination to love, we would fear that that one had sold his soul to the devil or had been so abused that it will take a miracle of God's grace to restore humanity to such a one.

The prophet Ezekiel has a lovely way of expressing that the natural state of humanity is to love. He speaks in terms of a "heart of flesh." It is as if the prophet

looks around at the world and sees so many failures of love that he fears that humanity has developed a “heart of stone.” But that is not right for us! That is not what our Maker intended. And so Ezekiel proclaims his great promise that God is going to heal the human heart and restore it to its natural life of love. In the Thirty-sixth Chapter of Ezekiel we read this:

<sup>26</sup>A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26, RSV)

## PERSONAL

Now, let us become personal. When we were baptized, Ezekiel’s old promise became true in you, in me. Our stony hearts were replaced by human hearts. Our old spirit was replaced by a new Spirit. And that Spirit yearns to be about its business. It longs to produce its fruit, the first of which is love.

Back in Seminary days, I once asked Professor Robert Jenson why there was so little love on earth. “If faith produces good works, as the Bible says and as our Lutheran confessions say, why are there so few good works on earth?” Jenson did not back down one millimeter from the Bible. He affirmed that faith produces good works. The problem is, he said, that we too often slip out of faith and then we become troubled by fear. We fear that life is too short, that the cost of love is too high, and so we fail to be the people of love that is natural and appropriate for us.

But if we come running back to our faith as soon as we can, then we come back to the trust that we can *afford* to be people of love, for Jesus lives and reigns and will bring good from our loving hearts.

There is power in the Gospel as Saint Paul says:

<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16, KJV)

And the chief form of this power is the ability to turn to the love that is right for us.

So, you have the Holy Spirit within you. Then turn to love. If you would not constrain and deform yourselves, then let the Holy Spirit get to his work. Do not mangle his natural flow toward love.

Love is “the most perfect architecture,” as Spurgeon once put it,<sup>2</sup> for love builds up. Love does not drag the community down, but upbuilds it:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

... “Knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. (1 Corinthians 8:1, RSV)

So with yourselves; since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. (1 Corinthians 14:12, RSV)

Let us give the Spirit free course in our lives. Let us develop the holy habit of pausing and asking ourselves, “Is this a loving thing to do?” Interrupt our wrath, interrupt our envy, interrupt our greed, our lust, our gossip, and all such vice, and ask about love. Let the life of the Triune God take stronger shape in us this Lent. And let the wonderful words of Saint Paul have more sway in our lives:

<sup>13</sup>So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13, RSV)

Altogether, let us more closely walk with Jesus whose love led him to yield up everything for us and for the world and to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.