

Out on a Limb: LOVE 6-1-08

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

About a year and half ago David and I did a sermon series on the seven deadly sins. Do you remember - Envy, greed, sloth, gluttony, anger, lust and the greatest of all the deadly sins, pride. Today we begin a new series. You might say this series is about the anti-dote to the deadly sins. Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker that reads: "God wants Spiritual fruit, not religious nuts." For nine weeks in June and August, David and I will be preaching on the fruit of the Spirit, or those characteristics and practices which manifest in those who are filled with God's spirit. The fruit of the Spirit, the Apostle Paul says, is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

In the beginning of the chapter in Galatians where Paul names the fruit of the Spirit, he writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1) At least since Lent, David and I have been preaching and

teaching about the amazing liberating power of Jesus' message. Paul understood this power very well, both from his own experience, as well as by observing what happened to people when they "got it;" when they heard in a deep way that they were no longer bound by "the way things are." In Jesus, a new life was possible. But that reality is one that can be quite elusive. One minute we really "get it." And another minute, we slip back into the old way of seeing as the world sees. The early Christians of Paul's day were trying to figure out just what it meant to be saved, and just how it happened. Was it through their own works? Was it something they had to say or do or believe?

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul was trying to get across a difficult message. You are free from the law. You are free from the traditions that have come to define who is favored and how to keep that favor. You are free from the sins of your ancestors. Through Christ, you are free from serving any master whether that be another person or a system or your own wants and desires. God loves you,

unconditionally. You don't have to prove yourself. You don't have to say a certain thing. There will not be a report card. That is good news!

"For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." You are truly free to live as one who know of and has experienced God's gracious and abounding love. With freedom comes both opportunity and responsibility.

Law is created in order to provide structure, to equalize things, to keep chaos at bay, to help ensure the common good, etc. Most laws are created because something is not working or a problem comes up that needs addressing or preventing. Law is important and good, but it is a tool, not an end. Paul tells the Christians of Galatia not to worry about the law. The law is not what brings freedom. The law is not what brings life. Rather, life comes as we follow Jesus and allow ourselves to be under the influence of God's Spirit. The test of a person's character is not in whether we follow the law. It is how we behave when no one is looking, when we aren't worried about "getting

caught." The test of a person's character, what we are made of, is revealed when, given the opportunity, the freedom, to speak and to act out of who we truly are on the inside, what is the result? According to Paul, the result, that which springs forth, the fruit, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Paul continues, "There is no law against these things." These are the foundation of God's intention for human action and relationship. These things are the very stuff of the kingdom of God. In a world filled with war and violence and hatred and greed and despair, the fruit of the Spirit is the hope of the world. Yet because it is in such contrast to the common wisdom, bearing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives just may take us out on a limb.

The first fruit of the Spirit in Paul's list is, of course, love. In I Corinthians 13 Paul names love as the greatest gift of all. Just as pride is the deadliest of sins, love is the greatest manifestation of God's spirit. What's the saying..., "Love covers a multitude of sins." Or, as

the Beatles once said, "All you need is love." I Corinthians 13 is one of those scriptures that often even people outside the church have heard because it is read at so many weddings. It was read at mine and Tim's wedding. Okay, just for fun, how many here had that scripture read at your wedding? Even though Paul's audience was not a wedding party, I Corinthians 13 is certainly a fitting scripture to read at a wedding because it describes the kind of love that is needed to sustain a relationship over a lifetime.

The Greek language has three words for love. *Eros* refers to sensual or erotic or romantic love. *Philia* refers to love based on relationships of kinship or friendship. You may remember this if you know that Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. The word used in our scripture today, *agape* refers to love that is gracious in origin, nature, and expression. It is a love that is self-giving and for the sake of the other. This is the word used for love about 90% of the time in New Testament writings. *Agape* love is not extended in expectation of

what will come in return, but in the sheer gift of seeking another's good. This is the kind of love that the world needs and that when at its best, the church models.

Paul wrote on love to a church in conflict. He wrote to remind those who follow Jesus that there is another way of living and relating to one another. There is a "more excellent way" to which we are called and against which there is no law. Put another way, without love, all those "good" things we do ring hollow. It's what's on the inside that counts. Paul's words make us ask the question of ourselves. Why am I doing what I am doing? Is it for my own desire for recognition? Is it because of duty? Or is it truly out of love?

Love is the foundation of all that is good. Love allows room for difference and for mistakes. Love offers grace and hopes the best for the other. Love is not selfish. It is what carries us and holds us together in community with others. It is the ground of meaning in life. *Agape* love is **not** a feeling, but a character trait. Feelings come and go.

They change with the seasons. They are dependent upon how others treat us or how we are feeling about ourselves. Feelings are not constant and they are often unreliable. The kind of love about which Paul speaks is abiding love. The attributes of love listed in verses 4-7 offers a picture of attitudes and actions. They are learned patterns of behavior cultivated over time in the context of a community that models and supports such behavior. Paul's letter suggests that the church should be a school for the cultivation of these habits and practices. The kind of love about which Paul speaks takes work and will. It takes practice and persistence. And it takes going out on a limb where many, if not all of your supports are gone, and where you must trust in God's abiding love in order to give love.

Catholic Sister Helen Prejean wrote a book called "Dead Man Walking" about her ministry to on death row inmates in Louisiana. Love's hold on Sister Helen took her out on a limb as she attended the execution of many on death row. She prayed for the man who would be

executed as well as the victims and the executioner. Her presence made her a target of verbal abuse by capital punishment advocates protesting outside the prison gates. Susan Sarandon played the role of Sister Helen in the movie, based on the book. Sean Penn played a death row inmate she ministered to. Penn's character was not someone to whom you were sympathetic. He did not come off as deserving of love. Yet Sister Helen told him, "I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you."

That kind of love-in-action did not come from a feeling. There was no warm fuzzy. It wasn't cute. But it was real because it came from the only source of such love - God. Apart from God, there is no way we can love the un-loveable. Apart from God, there is no way we can offer love to enemies and strangers. Apart from God, there is no way we can work for reconciliation beyond the demands of right and wrong. Apart from God, there is no way we can live without the law.

With God, with agape love, all things are possible. For God is love. Everything else will perish. But love never ends.

What the world needs is love. Not the kind based on feeling that comes and goes. But the kind of agape love, born of God, nurtured in communities of faith, and practiced over and over in both ordinary and extraordinary situations and events. What if we at First Christian Church saw ourselves as being part of a school for the cultivation of the habits and practices that make love, agape, self-giving, love possible and real? What if each of us committed ourselves to memorizing I Corinthians 13: 4-7 and putting those words into action? "*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*" May we bear the fruit of never-ending, abiding, love. Amen.

1 John 4:7,8 - God Is Love

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

I Corinthians 13 - The Gift of Love

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,

but do not have *love*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,

but do not have *love*, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,

but do not have *love*, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; *love* is kind; *love* is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. *Love* never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;

as for tongues, they will cease;

as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;

but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;

when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and *love* abide, these three; and the greatest of these is *love*.

¹⁸This is what I have seen to be good:

it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot.

¹⁹Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil— this is the gift of God.

²⁰For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Who wouldn't want those things?

Isn't *love* better than all the alternatives?

Isn't *joy* preferable to despair?

There is no law against love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control. Thanks be to God!

When we eat the fruit of the Spirit our lives work.

We aren't plagued by guilt and greed, shame and fear.

We don't have that sense that something is wrong at the center and that we are out of bounds, out of control, out of our league.

God's way works. That's the simple fact of it. If we want to live well... well, here's the way. Cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. The harvest will grow in

abundance.

At the end, when death draws near like an old friend, don't we want to be able to sing:

"I come with joy, a child of God, forgiven, loved and free,
the life of Jesus to recall, in love laid down for me?"

Isn't part of why we choose the right path and turn aside from temptation the hope of hearing Jesus' words:

"Well done, good and trustworthy servant.
Enter into the joy of your Master."

This summer Mary Jane and I are preaching about the fruit of the Spirit. We're hoping there will be something practical and positive for each of us to grab onto for our daily lives. We think all of us might want a little more love, a bit more joy. We believe cultivating the fruit of the Spirit is helpful.

Joy! Remember joy? Remember the bliss of it? Can you recall the contentment and well-being of joy? Didn't you have to do something for your joy to be complete? Didn't you have to shout, or sing, or stomp, or dance? I think of King David leaping for the joy of the Lord, dancing in the street, clapping and stamping. You can't just sit there when the joy surges up. You have to hold a festival, put on a feast. You find your lost coins: what do you do? You throw a party and invite in the neighbors. Joy holds hands with celebration.

For joy to be complete we need somebody else. We need to thank somebody or sing a song or share a gift. The siamese twin of joy is gratitude. Happiness is their child. But joy is the source and joy comes from God.

Sometime joy comes in a quiet moment. We are surprised by her approach and welcome her gently into the embrace of our hearts. Maybe we have endured a season of wretchedness and grief and joy steals across the horizon like the rising sun, riding on the wings of peace.

Joy lives even in the face of suffering and turmoil and horrible times when your heart is breaking and your family is troubled and your health is failing and death has come close. Kahlil Gibran said,

"The deeper that sorrow carves into your being the more joy you can contain."

Joy wells up when we know that no matter what happens that God is with us and we are held and loved and strengthened and given power to endure. Joy's root is in salvation: even though they can kill the body, God protects the soul. God is in charge. We are okay. We don't have to be responsible for everything. God decides what and who endures. Faith, hope and love abide, these three. But they come riding in the limousine driven by joy.

"The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything," declared Julian of Norwich. She knew hardship and grief. She learned God's abundance in the face of poverty and need. Behold God in everything.

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.

I think of Paul, locked up in a dungeon, writing in his joy about the love of Jesus, breaking out into exclamations to his readers... "How I wish all of you could be just as I am... oh, except for these chains!"

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Down in my heart. Down in my heart. And I'm so happy, so very happy, I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. I'm happy because of the joy!

"Here is what is good: to eat and drink and find enjoyment in our work.

For God gives all we have.

And we scarcely have time to brood over the days of our lives because God keeps us occupied with the joy of our hearts." Even the cynical writer of Ecclesiastes could not suppress the joy that flows like a current through the center of faithful living.

Life is a gift of God. Joy is a gift of the Spirit. God is the source of all that makes life joyous. "What is the chief end of humans?" asked the old catechism? "To glorify God and enjoy God forever!" Behold God in everything.

The handmaiden of joy is gratitude. If you want joy in your heart that spills over into happiness then cultivate gratitude. None of the deadly sins can thrive in the company of gratitude. A grateful heart grows into joy. Eat

and drink and find enjoyment in work, be grateful. Joy will come. Find God in everything.

The fruit of the Spirit grows out on a limb. Fruit does not grow on the trunk.

Tree climbing is a fine art practiced by some boys... at least of my generation. There is a certain safety to be had by clinging to the trunk where the branches are thick and everything is solid. But the bliss of the thing is to leave the trunk and go venturing out on a limb. Out on the limb things are in motion. Breezes move things about. The earth drops far away, down below, where there is no connecting trunk on which to grab.

Going out on a limb requires trust and daring. It is where the joy of the tree is to be experienced. Going out on a limb requires that we trust God to be right in showing us the way.... that we believe love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are better than any of the alternatives. It means that we give up fighting for our way and begin trusting God's way. Joy comes. It's a sure thing, when we trust.

Behold God in everything. Take the fruit of the Spirit. Receive the joy God offers until there is no time for brooding. Enjoy food and drink and relationships and work, for God is good and life is a gift. Take joy.

Out on a Limb: PEACE

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things." (Gal.5:22,23) Today we continue our focus on the fruit of the spirit as we take up PEACE. Last Sunday our closing hymn was that favorite Christmas carol, Joy to the World. At Christmas time, we hear the stories of Jesus' birth and the meaning given to that birth. A scripture often read is Isaiah 9:6: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Luke picks up on this theme and applies it to Jesus as he quotes Zechariah proclaiming, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of

peace." (Lk.78,79) And the angels themselves proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Lk. 2:14) If you grew up hearing the stories of Jesus' birth, the idea that Jesus is the Prince of Peace is nothing new.

The gospel writers give us many examples of how Jesus did, indeed "guide our feet into the way of peace." But Jesus' way was not the way of the world; of conventional wisdom. Jesus' way of peace was not through strength of force, but through strength of love. In his sermon on the mount in Matthew, Jesus says to the crowds, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Later, he tells them, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek; turn the other also..." Jesus continues, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God

in heaven..." Jesus' life and ministry and teaching and even his death was a testimony to who he was as the Prince of Peace. Then, as he journeyed to Jerusalem for the last time before his death, he looked out over the city and wept. As he wept he said, "If you, even you, had only recognized the things that make for peace!" (Lk.19:42) Jesus came to proclaim peace and to show the way to peace.

Here at First Christian Church, we don't require that you say certain words or believe certain points of doctrine in order to be part of this community. We are committed to following Jesus, but we don't always believe the same things or see the Bible the same way. Some of us are more certain of what we believe and others have many questions, but are glad for a place to explore and think and ask those questions. That was true in the early church as well,... in those years after Jesus death and resurrection,... when the Apostle Paul and others were starting churches in places near and far from Jerusalem. There were many points of disagreement. There were questions about what you

needed to believe or say or do in order to be part of the community of followers of Jesus. Most of Paul's letters were written to speak a word to a church in conflict, struggling to determine what is essential to the faith and what is not. One introduction to Romans says, "Paul's Letter to the Romans was written to encourage and guide Christians in living their lives Christianly, that is, living lives formed by the Spirit in Jesus Christ...it is primarily a text directed toward daily, ordinary living." For Paul, that's what it comes down to... how does Jesus change our daily living? How do we behave when we have been liberated from the law and empowered by God's spirit? What does that new life in Christ look like? That's what counts.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has the heading, "Marks of the True Christian" for the section of Romans I read earlier. In other words, this is how you can identify a Christian. These are the characteristics you will see. And, of course, just as with the list of the fruit of the Spirit, love tops this list. Paul writes, "Let love be genuine;

hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." Love, hope, service, compassion, steadfastness... these are all marks of a Christian. But then Paul continues.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;...No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Now Paul is meddling. How can he say these things? Is he out of touch with the real world? Doesn't he know how things work? How can we possibly be expected to love and feed and pray for our enemies? How can we have an attitude of love and grace towards those who show no such attitude toward us? But Paul had much practice loving enemies and praying for those who persecuted him. He suffered much and spent time in jail. He encountered many who tried to stop him... who did not have good will toward him... who tried to do him in. But Paul had a bigger vision, a bigger picture of life. He had new life in Christ and was no longer bound by the way that says "an eye for an eye." Paul was saved by the one who shows us the way to peace is through love, self-giving love. Paul followed Jesus who said, "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?" (Mt.5:46,47)

When thinking of peace as the fruit of the Spirit, it is important to acknowledge that peace is personal, relational, and political. When we walk in close relationship with God, there is a peace within our soul, the kind like we sang about during the prayer time, when you or I experience that "it is well with my soul." That kind of peace keeps us going when things get difficult. That kind of peace gives us the strength to persevere and to trust that things will be alright. But if that peace is a fruit of the spirit, then it also guides our relationships with others and gives us the ability to attempt to overcome evil with good. If our peace is born of the Spirit, we follow Jesus, taking actions for peace even when it is not easy, both with people we know and love, and with enemies and strangers.

It takes courage and creativity, vision and imagination, along with much prayer and the power of the Spirit to follow the Prince of Peace. And it might even take you out on a limb. The mark of a Christian is the ability to think beyond one's own feelings and reactions in the

moment and to see the big picture, through the eyes of God, of a world in need of life-giving, love. It starts within us and extends to those around us. As we nurture our relationship with God and as we are nurtured by the community gathered together in Christ's name, we become more able to, in Jesus' words, "recognize the things that make for peace." St. Francis, in his desire to bear the mark of a true Christian, wrote and practiced living that prayer we prayed earlier,

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be
consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

May the peace of *God*, which surpasses all understanding, guard
your hearts and your minds in *Christ Jesus*. Amen.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

The heaviest piece of furniture to move is the cross. Every day we are asked to pick up that cross and carry it. Every day it is heavy.

And we get tired. We grow weary of the struggle.

- We get tired of paying the cost for following Jesus.
- We get tired of watching friends buy new toys we cannot afford because we tithe.
- We get tired of not getting invited back to parties because we mentioned God once too often.
- We get tired of forgiving and forgiving and finding ways to forgive when it's so much easier to get revenge.
- We get tired of being made fun of because of our faith.
- We get tired of fighting the problems in the city and country, tired of the unending conflict for justice, tired of serving the needs of people who turn away without a word of thanks, tired of battling to keep the church going, tired of combating our own addictions and cravings, tired

of fighting off our wish to just lay down the plow and walk away from the Lord's field. Why not let somebody else plow up this rocky ground?

Eventually we lose hope. We have a Bible study about honest labor but we're going up against a multi-million dollar gambling campaign that lures people away from the love of work into the grasp of greed. We lose hope when society's problems get worse despite the efforts of generations of people who care. We lose heart when the forces that create fear and make for war seem stronger all the time and the path to peace seems futile.

If we're going to live for God then we're in for a fight. That's just the way it is.

Some people lose so much heart they just can't pick up that cross anymore. They wear out. They slip out the side door, drop out from the battlefield. We look around and they are gone. Some used to pour their whole lives into the offering plate but somehow missed the blessing. They have all the scars but none of the hope. They are worn down by the resistance, worn out by the suffering. The cheerful morning of thanks to God has eroded down to a weary sigh of resignation.

I know a man whose life is devoted to serving the needs of his beloved, but pain-racked wife. Unrelieved physical suffering demands a payment in emotion. When hope that life will ever be better fails, heart is lost and sometimes faith. The first things this man does every day is to pray for patience. The old word for patience was long-suffering.

Patience is fruit of the spirit. It's there with the big three: love, joy, and peace. It's long suffering in the face of difficult circumstances. It's persevering in the face of delay or provocation without becoming annoyed or upset. It's steadfastness under strain. It's the opposite of haste, impetuosity, and wrath. Patience is the path to peace.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: And we urge you, beloved to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

I Thessalonians 5:14-18

Have you ever thought about what a patient congregation must be? Of course it will be welcoming. Idlers will get in. Faint hearted people will join up. Weak people will find a home. Evil doers will be attracted to such a place. And, patiently, without irritation or upset, the people of the congregation will do good to one another and the gospel will take root, and in the face of prayer without ceasing God will help idlers to leave idleness aside, fearful people will no longer be prisoners of fear, weak people will be given strength, evil doers will find a better way. Peace will reign. Patient churches do not try to scare the hell out of people with threats of a wrathful God. They love people into heaven where God's grace flows freely between the twin banks of gratitude and joy.

I suppose many people think of patience as a passive thing, lying down

before adversity to endure the long haul. But there is another kind of patience, a better kind. Our lesson talks about following Jesus and Jesus is running a race before a great cloud of witnesses in the arena. It's our turn to run. We strip off everything that will slow us down - all those shackling sins - so we can run. Jesus set the course and, being the perfecter of our faith that he is, he shows us how to run. He teaches us how to handle the long hills, how to get a second wind, how to keep our eyes on the prize at the end. But running is hard. No matter. Jesus ran and endured the shame and punishment of the cross. They laughed at him dying there. They humiliated and taunted him - but he never shrank back, wimped out, lost faith.

So when we lose heart and have suffered long, look at Jesus who for the sake of the joy endured. I'm not trying to say that suffering doesn't matter or that there is some particular glory in living through it. The gospel isn't about making the suffering go away, it's about keeping heart and faith through it, like Jesus.

First thing in the morning: put on compassion, then kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, says Paul, writing to the Colossians (Colossians 3:12). You'll be able to run the whole race, all the way to glory. Amen and amen.

Out on a Limb: GENEROSITY 8-3-08
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

In June David and I started a sermon series on the nine characteristics the Apostle Paul names as the fruit of the Spirit. These nine traits, according to Paul, can be found alive and well among those truly in touch with the Spirit of God. We have already addressed love, joy, peace, patience and kindness. We took a break from the Fruit of the Spirit in July when we shared worship with the United Church of Christ. So, now we are ready for the sixth fruit, generosity.

In Paul's list, love comes first. But in the list of the ten transformational practices in Buddhism, generosity is number one. I think most people understand that generosity has the power to transform our lives and the world. All the religions of the world have something to say about the importance of generosity. It certainly changed the lives and practices of those first Christians.

The book of Acts provides us with an account of what happened when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the people and the church began. Pretty much immediately, people wanted to share. They wanted to give what they had to something important and be part of God's work and so those with more shared with those who had less. All gave of their time daily gathering for prayer and reading the scripture and eating together. By the end of the second chapter of Acts we are told, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

There's just something that happens when the Spirit of God takes hold in our lives. It causes us to want to give, to be generous because we see and hear and experience that God is generous. We experience the abundance of God. And when we are grateful for all

that we have, we want to share and we want others to experience the goodness of God.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." (2 Cor. 8:1,2)

Generosity has nothing to do with how much you have. It's about what you do with what you've got. Generosity has to do with giving, not because you expect recognition or a reward; not for "what's in it for me"; not because those to whom you give are particularly deserving.

Rather, generosity - as a fruit of the Spirit - comes as you desire to promote the well-being of another, just as God has given you abundant life. It is a releasing of what you have and who you are and how you see the world in service of God's great purposes.

There are different ways we can express generosity. One way, the one we probably think of most often, is sharing the things we have

such as money and possessions. Hopefully, as God's spirit takes hold in your life, you give of your money to the church and other causes that serve people and God's creation. Through our offerings, we promote the common good and help those in need. Recently, many people and communities in Iowa have received the generosity of others from across the country as people respond to the tornados and floods by giving of their money and time. We all understand what it is to give of our resources to help others. And, I'm quite certain each of us has benefitted many times from the generosity of others.

One good illustration of generosity, that self-giving concern for another, is told in the story of two brothers who farmed together. They shared equally in all of the work and split the profits exactly. Each had his own granary. One of the brothers was married and had a large family; the other brother was single.

One day the single brother thought to himself, "It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. My brother has many mouths to feed,

while I have but one. I know what I'll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother's granary." So, each night when it was dark, he carefully carried a sack of grain, placing it in his brother's barn.

Now the married brother thought to himself, "It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my brother has none. I know what I'll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother's granary." And he did.

Each morning the two brothers were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they had just as many as before.

One night the two brothers met each other halfway between their barns, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery. And they embraced, and loved each other deeply.

There is a old Jewish legend that says God looked down from heaven, saw the two brothers embracing, and said, "I declare this to be a holy place, for I have witnessed extraordinary love here." It is said that it was on that spot that Solomon built the first temple.

Of course inherent in this story of generosity with things is also a generosity of Spirit, or attitude which is another way generosity gets expressed. We probably all know certain people who are very generous with their words and their encouragement; people who give freely in ways that build others up through praise and inspiration and hope, those who are emotionally available to others and present when a listening ear is needed. That is certainly another aspect of generosity. It is a giving of life as we have received it from God. It is believing in people and adding to the positive energy and spirit in a group or in a room, both to those we know as well as strangers.

Anne Frank, the German Jewish teenager who, along with her family and others, hid out in an attic in Amsterdam from Nazi

persecutors for a couple of years before she was deported and died in a concentration camp, wrote in her now famous diary, "It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart." Can you imagine what would compel a young woman in her situation to be so generous with her words and her spirit? It could only be fruit of the very Spirit of God.

Another expression of generosity is how we use our lives and experiences and resources and attitudes and words to empower others on their life's journey. There is an expression that you've probably heard. I think it fits here. "You can give a person a fish and they'll eat for a day. Or, you can teach them to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime." When we care about people and spend time with them and nurture them and empower them to see the abundance of God's love and blessing poured out in the world, then their lives may be transformed and they, too, just may be empowered to tap into the source of abundant life. That's a gift that just keeps on giving.

The story of the bench I shared with the children illustrates the kind of generosity that has the potential to keep on giving. As I mentioned before, there was a bench stolen from a garden at Collegiate Presbyterian Church that had been given in memory of an 8-year old girl. The little girl had 3 brothers who are now 7, 9, and 11. There is concern about how this tragedy might affect the faith and attitudes of these boys, so someone decided to call upon the people of Ames to rise up in a spirit of generosity and offer a different kind of lesson, one that will surely be remembered by the family of the little girl. This act doesn't call for people's generosity in terms of money. They only want people to give one dollar each. Rather, this act calls upon each of us to respond with a generous spirit that cares about children we don't even know and that doesn't need any recognition for ourselves. As we respond, we participate in living out of Anne Frank's belief that people are truly good at heart.

Holding on, attaching ourselves to things that do not satisfy, fear, despair, bitterness, resentment, greed, an attitude of scarcity...

those are things that keep us from being generous. There is a story in India about how easy it is to catch a monkey. All you have to do is put out a large, heavy, narrow-necked glass jar with some nuts inside. A monkey will reach in, grasp the nuts and get caught because it is unwilling to relinquish its grip, release the nuts, and thereby free its hand from the jar. Its desire for the nuts is so strong that it won't let go and find freedom.

A rich young ruler once asked Jesus how to find eternal life. Jesus told the young man to give away all his possessions and follow him. It is in giving that we find meaning and purpose that transcends the smallness that can define our lives if we let it. The closer we are in tune with the Spirit of God, the easier generosity becomes. But we can nurture that spirit every day in small and large ways. Through the cultivation of generosity, opening our hearts and minds and possessions to the influence of God, surely the world will be a better place for all. Amen.

Luke 5:17-26

¹⁷One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

¹⁸Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; ¹⁹but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.

²⁰When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you."

²¹Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

²²When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ²³Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? ²⁴But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home."

²⁵Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. ²⁶Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."

Luke 8:42b-48

As he went, the crowds pressed in on him.

⁴³Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her.

⁴⁴She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.

⁴⁵Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?"

When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you."

⁴⁶But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me."

⁴⁷When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed.

⁴⁸He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Out on a Limb: FAITHFULNESS 8-17-08

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Great is THY faithfulness. Don't we love to sing those words.

They remind us of God's steadfast love that always surrounds us.

Those words remind us that though the ground shakes and the walls

tumble, through storms and turbulence, grief and doubt, God never

leaves us. We can trust that we are constantly surrounded by God's

presence and love. And time after time, that assurance gives us the

strength we need to get through the dark nights of our existence and

greet the light of morning. Great is THY faithfulness, O God, who

created us and breathed life into us and who renews our lives from day

to day.

This morning our focus is on faithfulness. We know about

faithfulness because of our experience of God's presence in our lives.

But today we consider the other side of faithfulness - our faithfulness

to God. We reflect upon faithfulness as a fruit of the Spirit

blossoming within us as we deepen our relationship with God and, you might say, take on that very characteristic of God - faithfulness.

Faith and faithfulness as used in the New Testament seem to imply a relationship of trust and confidence. Faith recognizes the message of God to be true and allows that message to become part of who we are and how we respond. Faithfulness to the message of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is no passive matter. It is active and bold and persistent.

The stories I read from Luke are stories of faith. The first story is about some men who have a friend in need of healing. These men didn't just pray for a miracle. They didn't sit around saying how wonderful Jesus is or inviting their friend to believe. These men picked up the bed of their paralyzed friend and carried it, with the man on it, to the place where Jesus was teaching. And if that weren't enough, when they saw they couldn't get through, they lifted him, bed and all, onto the roof, cut a hole in the roof, and let him down right in front of Jesus. That is pretty bold if you ask me. When Jesus saw

this... as the verse reads, "When he saw *their faith*," he forgave their sins and healed the man. I don't know if the paralyzed man had faith, but the faith of the friends was enough to heal him.

The second story is like the first, only this time, we have a woman who has suffered from an affliction for 12 years. Something about Jesus gave her faith, and that faith gave her the courage and the trust to touch Jesus that she might be healed. What is so remarkable about this story is that this woman, because she was bleeding, would have been considered unclean, and there were strict laws against those who are unclean touching those considered clean. Then, add to that, that it was an unclean *woman* touching a clean *man* and now you have a formula for serious, life-threatening consequences. Jesus knew this. But instead of healing her quietly, he used her bold faith as a testimony and example to others. "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." This woman put her complete trust, including trust of her very life, in Jesus. And she was healed. Her faith saved her life and made her well.

In the time with the children I talked about Horton the elephant. Do you remember Horton's motto? "I meant what I said. And I said what I meant... an elephant's faithful 100%." There is another story about Horton. One that recently came out in movie form, "Horton Hears a Who." It is a similar story to "Horton Hatches the Egg." This time, Horton is bathing in a pool in the Jungle of Nool when he hears a small noise coming from inside a dust speck. It is the yelp of some tiny person calling for help. Horton thinks about how it must feel for this poor little person about to land in the pool and decides, "I'll just have to save him. Because, after all, a person's a person, no matter how small."

Like those Jesus healed, Horton's faith and faithfulness was quite bold and courageous and, in fact, saved the day. In order to be faithful, Horton had to endure being mocked and threatened. At one point, the dust speck was stolen from him and dropped into a field full of clover. But Horton was faithful. He picked each clover in that field until he found the one on which the dust speck lay. He saved the Whos

that day. But then there was another threat - to boil the dust speck and be rid of it once and for all. So Horton encouraged the people of Whoville to speak, sing and shout as loud as they could so that others could hear and believe. And, in the end, it was a small child who made the difference. When the other animals of the Jungle heard the Whos, they wanted to help Horton protect their tiny world. Horton's faith saved all those Whos.

I need to say a word here. It matters what we place our faith in. Faithfulness in God is the fruit of the Spirit. And that faithfulness gives us courage and boldness and perseverance to keep on even in the midst of trial and adversity, in the midst of skeptics and nay-sayers. Faithfulness in other things, hanging onto an idea in spite of everything may not, in every case be a good idea. It may just mean we've lost our bearings. That is where our connection to God and discerning God's message is so very important. God is trustworthy, reliable, and worthy of our confidence and devotion. Faith in God allows us to do strange and amazing things for the good of another. Faithfulness to God keeps

us moving on the right path even in the middle of a storm and shifting winds.

Theologian Marcus Borg calls faith the "way of the heart, not the way of the head." "Faith," says Borg, "means loyalty, allegiance, the commitment of the self at the deepest level, the commitment of the heart." "To be faithful to God means not only to love God, but to love that which God loves - namely, the neighbor, and indeed the whole of creation." (The Heart of Christianity, pg. 26, 32, 34) Faithfulness comes from God, for it is the very character of God. And God's faithfulness is to each one of us and bids each one of us to respond with the whole of who we are, loving as God loves, seeing as God sees.

The Spirit of God gives us the power to be faithful to God's vision for the world, despite the odds, despite the conventional wisdom, despite doubts. Nearly twenty years ago, on December 7, 1988, an earthquake devastated the northwestern section of Armenia, killing an estimated 25,000 persons. In one small town, directly after the

earthquake, a father rushed to his son's school only to find that the school had been flattened and there was no sign of life.

But he had no thought of turning back. He had often told his son, "No matter what, I'll always be there for you when you need me!"

Though the prospects appeared hopeless, he began feverishly removing rubble from where he believed his son's classroom had been. Other forlorn parents only wailed hopelessly. "My son!" "My daughter!" Some told the father to go home, that there was no chance that any of the pupils could be alive. To which this loving father replied, "I made my son a promise that I'd be there for him anytime he needed me. I must continue to dig."

Courageously, he proceeded alone. No one volunteered to help him. He simply had to know for himself: "Is my boy alive or is he dead?" With strength and endurance beyond himself, the faithful, loving father continued to dig... for 8 hours... for 12 hours... 24 hours... 36 hours. Then in the 38th hour, as he heaved away a heavy piece of rubble, he heard voices. "Armand!" he screamed.

A child's voice responded: "Dad! It's me,... Armand!" Then, "I told the other kids not to worry. I told 'em that if you were alive, you'd save me, and when you saved me, they'd be saved. You promised you would always be there for me! You did it, Dad!"

Moments later, the dad was helping his son Armand and 13 other frightened, hungry, thirsty boys and girls climb out of the debris. Free at last! When the building collapsed, these children had been spared in a tent-like pocket. The father lovingly carried his son home to his mother, where he was given the care he needed.

When the townspeople praised Armand's dad, his explanation was, "I promised my son, 'No matter what, I'll be there for you!'" That is true faithfulness.

As we tune our lives to God's spirit more and more, our hearts say to God, "no matter what, I'll be there for you... I'll do what you ask me to do... I'll go where you want me to go... I'll care for those you send me." Like the friends of the paralyzed man, like the bleeding woman, like Horton the elephant, like the Armenian father, when God's spirit

touches us, we can, indeed, move mountains. May it be so for each of us. Amen.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with ³all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

It is **so** good to be back here in worship after all these Sundays of being out of the state. Looking out at you, a room full of friends and people who have shared this long-time journey I am filled with a profound gratitude to you, for you. It is a joy, a privilege, a satisfaction to be part of the worshipping community at First Christian. Thanks be to God!

Having said all that, we all know that a church is such a fragile thing. We bring wounds and warts into the body of Christ with us and they affect us. We trust our inmost hearts into the care of others who sometimes are impatient with us. Sometimes people distrust motives and create a climate of accusation. The loving fellowship fades in the glare of discord.

Inside the fragile fragrance of the church sometimes we need to sit down together, put on our reading glasses, take up the book and pull out a passage:

I... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain

the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Sometimes we just need to join hands and hearts at the table where we begin with the precious words, "On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and broke it." People in any church know about betrayal and brokenness. We decide to follow a different path. Running down the center line of that path is gentleness.

Outside, all around us, especially in an election year there is bickering and biting and toxic vitriol. In the clamor and climbing to power people attack each other as the surest way to victory. The world knows about domination and force. The world is full of lawsuits and torture, theft and lies. The fruit of the Spirit does not grow out on the limb of violence.

It's different in here. The path is narrow here where we follow a leader struggling up ahead, carrying a cross. Today we talk about gentleness. Gentleness is what we hope for. Gentleness is what we need. Gentleness is the elixir that changes toxicity into reconciliation. Gentleness is the glue that bonds us when we are stressed to the breaking point.

We cultivate a gentle spirit on the inside so we can be kind on the outside. Mature Christians are gentle. They don't blast and bluster. They don't make demands and issue ultimatums. They don't keep score of wrongs and find

ways to get even. They're not irritable, rude or resentful. They are clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. In them blossoms the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We love those gentle people whose lives are a beacon showing us the way, whose hearts are large enough to embrace us around our wounds and warts, whose witness is enough to keep us on the path. They have a great measure of grace given. For them we give thanks to God.

Gentleness is a fruit to be cultivated, it requires courage and strength. It's not for wimps, cowards, or people who don't talk because they are too afraid. Gentle people speak the truth in love, even when the speaking of truth is a difficult thing. Gentleness is restrained strength used in such a way to not bring injury to another. It has nothing to do with bullying, browbeating, or bossing. Gentleness is love in action. Gentleness is caring about the other person enough to reach out in compassion, to summon up patience and to entertain generosity when we might want to withhold grace. The Holy Spirit is content in a person's gentle heart. Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit of God for God is gentle.

Isaiah sings of God:

See, the Lord God comes with might! His arm rules for him.
His recompense is before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.

God rules and reigns. God holds the keys to death and destruction as well as life and love. But how does God come? Like a shepherd gathering the little lambs in arms, carrying them close, gently leading the mothers to safety. Powerful God uses tender restraint for the sake of the weak. God is gentle with us. Gentleness is what we hope for. Gentleness is what we need. There is enough harsh demand and condemnation out there. There is enough hatred and bloodlust out there. There are lies and deceits, fears and stepping on the backs of others out there. In the fragile fellowship of the church we look to God who is gentle.

We look to Jesus who said,

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30.

- When they wanted to kill the woman they'd caught in adultery Jesus saved her life and lifted her up, gently.
- When lame, blind, poor, outcast, condemned throw-away people heard about Jesus they hounded him like pavaratci after a celebrity, he welcomed them, tended to them, reached out to them. The last, the lost and the least found their way to him and he, like the gentle shepherd, picked them up and carried them next to his heart, to places

of safety.

The path of political gentleness is the only way to peace. Jesus went riding into town on a donkey demonstrating that the path to peace does not go through the legions of Rome. Jesus refused to crush the little ones or throw away the discarded ones. He used great power in the face of all the forces that rage together as one who was gentle and lowly of heart. When prejudice, hate, discrimination, force, coercion, violence, domination, and oppression rule the day, when we suffer physical or psychological pain at the hands of others, gentleness seems a tiny impotent thing. How can there be room for gentleness in a world of control, manipulation and domination?

There is room because Jesus made room for it. He called a church around it. He opened a door to it. He chose death on a cross of brutality to teach it because it is the only way. The healing of the world, the saving of the world, will never come through domination and violence. Kingdoms and empires and risen and fallen throughout all of history and none has stood. God's kingdom, where there is no more dying or sighing or crying any more is a gentle, peaceable thing, as foolish as a pipe dream and more enduring than the pyramids.

Faith, hope and love abide, these three. They ride into town on gentleness, are wrapped up in patience, reaching out with humbleness, making every effort to maintain the unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace because there is one body, one Spirit, one calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God of all who is above all and through all and in all. Choose gentleness. Make it

a campaign. It saves the world.

¹Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,
To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the
righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

²May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and
of Jesus our Lord.

³His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness,
through his own glory and goodness. ⁴Thus he has given us, through these
things, his precious and very great promises,
so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the
world because of lust, and may become participants of this divine
nature.

⁵For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith
with goodness,

and goodness with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control,
and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness,

⁷and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with
love.

⁸For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you
from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus
Christ. ⁹For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is
forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.

Anyone who lacks these things, says our writer, is nearsighted and blind and forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Well, who'd want to be forgetful of the cleansing of past sins? Don't we want all the forgiveness we can get?

Today we're talking about self-control, the last on Paul's list of fruit of the

Spirit, the topic of summer sermons. I don't know about anyone else's interior life but I have had to take some long, hard looks at mine to understand anything about self-control. I know self-control is more than mastering evil impulses or repressing raging desires. The way of suppression won't work. That path makes us mean and dangerous because we can't stuff it all in all the time. We become forgetful of past cleansing. We don't have enough will power to make ourselves righteous. Self-control must come from somewhere else.

We want our lives to please God. Living in such a way that pleases God is called living by faith. Living by faith builds good character. Good character opens our minds to appreciate spiritual things. Spiritual understanding goes hand-in-hand with self-control. Having self-control also makes it possible to have endurance. Patient endurance is one of the building blocks for reverence and wonder because we take time to ponder. People whose eyes are open for wonder and reverence are people who make good friends because they love generously. They are people we like. They have powerful lives. They are always growing deeper. They learn their lessons. They become saintly. They do not forget graces given and mercies received. They live in joy.

The little letter of II Peter is a caution to Christians to take care of our interior lives because what's on the inside shows up on the outside. You kids: I know that listening to some sermon is about as much fun as eating shoe polish. You hear all these words that don't make much sense when the big

question in your mind is, "When is this going to be over."

But I hope you do listen. That talk about being a good person is important. We want you to grow up safe and strong in mind and body and spirit. I have preached some funerals for young people who died early because of drugs or alcohol. They weren't safe. I have visited people in jail because some they didn't understand that faith is serious stuff. There really is a right path and a wrong path, a smart way and a stupid way, a way that when you're old you can look back on your life and feel good about it, and a way that when you're old you're miserable and feel like a failure and are afraid to die.

We call living by faith a blessing. We call living for yourself a curse. We all get to choose which way we'll go. Self-control is part of how we make the choice.

The man was three sheets to the wind... out of control... on a rampage. He stampeeded across the crowded room hurling curses, throwing punches, pulling a knife... An argument with someone he hardly knew over something he'd barely remember in the morning led to his plunging his knife into another man's heart in a moment of alcohol-induced rage. Loss of control can mean loss of life. It can get you locked up in prison where others control your life. He'd not cultivated through the years the qualities of character which lead to godliness. He'd followed the other path. Who wants that?

Paul made a list of nine qualities we see in people who are alive in God: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We're all about helping each other in the church become better at love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Sometimes you see people around the church having a heart-to-heart talk and you can imagine that somewhere in that conversation love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are present. They are the building blocks of a good life. They add up to salvation.

This is the end of the list: self-control. We like control. Having control is to be in charge of things. Control is power. The Latin word translated "self-control" is con-tin-en-tia - a word we never hear in English. But we hear the opposite of continentia - incontinence. Out of control. At the mercy of forces which we cannot manage.

We do not so much like self-control. We have trouble with control of the self. Even Paul, premier in goodness, knowledge and the power of persuasion admitted that he had trouble with himself: the good which I want to do I neglect and the evil I wish I didn't do, well there it is, again.

Another way of translating continentia is "discipline." We've listened to interviewers talking to Shawn Johnson and other Olympic athletes. They usually ask the question of training - how many years, how many hours a day,

how much sacrifice. Every athlete talks about discipline... enduring the pain of the moment for the hope of glory one day. Self-control, discipline - not exactly glamorous notions - but necessary.

The opposite self-control and discipline is lawless, wrathful, lusting, greedy living found in barrooms, strip parlors, and gilded casinos where extortion, temptation, greed control; where people rule by power but the spirit that reins is not the Holy Spirit of life but the horrible spirit of death.

Self-control is more than managing our temptations and it's not the same thing as battling our addictions. There is a beautiful line in Proverbs: "Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control." (25:28) Walls give protection and boundary. A city breached is one which has been overcome by people who have attacked with flaming arrows, battering rams, and catapults and they've broken down those walls. Those inside will become slaves in another land. Their lives will not be good.

Self-control gives boundary and border. It's the student deciding to miss a party because getting the grade in class also means getting admitted into college, even though the party would be lots more fun at the moment. It's the timid, shy person getting courage screwed up and starting a conversation, or expressing a need, or defending a right. It's the loud-mouth deciding to keep silent and think before speaking.

Babies have no self-control. They must depend on others for everything. But as they grow they begin to be able to manage for themselves. They learn to feed themselves. They master the bathroom thing. They choose what clothing they will accept. It's part of self-control. As they mature they take responsibility for their behavior. When they have good people around them they learn God's gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that make life a blessing.

Paul's list starts with love and ends with self-control. Between are the marks of a life pleasing to God, which we want, because it is the way that works. Cultivate that fruit as you grow in godliness that you will be a blessing.

¹You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, ²but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. ³For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, ⁴but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; ⁶nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, ⁷though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. ⁸So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

Kindness. Glen Campbell sang about how you've got to try a little kindness. Medieval Brits made kindness one of the six noble virtues of a knight. You can buy from hundreds of coffee mugs calling for kindness. It is the miracle cure for violence. The opposite of kindness, said the theologians of old, is envy. Envy wants what the other person has. Kindness gives it to them. "Be kind," said Will Rogers, "for everyone you see is fighting a hard battle."

Being kind is not the same as being nice. You can be kind but not nice. Nice is being agreeable. Being kind is acting for the good of the other person. Being kind is adapting to the need of the other person instead of insisting that the other person adapt to our need. Kindness is the ability to act for the welfare of people who tax our patience. Kindness has a gentleness about it, a good disposition. I think Paul added kindness to his list of the fruit of the Spirit because the Holy Spirit removes abrasive qualities from our character.

- Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can love hope, bear, and endure all things.
- Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can peace pass all understanding.
- Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can joy flow like a fountain long after happiness has fled crying away.
- Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can we be kind to those who offend us, disrespect us, ignore us, or behave unkindly toward us.
"Pray for those who despitefully use you," said Jesus, "bless and do not curse them."

Jesus was unfailingly kind. He was not even once unkind to anyone. He was not always nice, however.

The Hebrew word most often translated as kindness is equally translated as "steadfast love." How many times in the Psalms and throughout the Bible is God praised for having "steadfast love." Steadfast love and kindness come from the same source. They are attributes of God. The King James translation calls the word, "lovingkindness." Now that's a word we don't hear on talk radio or late night TV. It embodies mercy and loyalty.

There's another link behind the word kindness. It goes back so far the language is nearly lost. It comes from the same as the word for womb. Kindness, deep down, is the feeling a mother has when she nurses her own child. I can think of no more profound emotion. She gives herself to that child, that hungry, demanding, sleep-disrupting, beloved child. She loves. She is patient. Her joy knows no bounds. Her hopes know no end. She is kindly toward that child. I am amazed that Paul could write in his letter: "we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were **gentle**

among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

It's too bad that people don't make that powerful connection in a culture that thinks rudeness is in and the virtues are out of fashion. A culture that treasured love, peace, joy, patience, and kindness would not produce serial killers, child molesters, greedy, malicious, or hateful people. And we haven't even gotten to others on Paul's list: generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The world Jesus knew was dominated by Caesar. Jesus had a radically different agenda.

- Caesar rode a war horse. Jesus rode a donkey.
- Caesar carried a sword. Jesus carried a basin and towel.
- Caesar wore a crown of gold. Jesus wore a crown of thorns.
- Caesar crushed his enemies. Jesus loved his enemies.
- Caesar tortured others. Jesus was tortured by others.
- Caesar killed and finally died. Jesus died and rose from death to life.
- Caesar was cruel. Jesus was kind.

As for me and my household, we will follow Jesus and not Caesar. The fruit of the Holy Spirit produces a people who have the mind of Christ Jesus. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is not only not against the law, it makes most of the laws we have unnecessary for there will be no robbing and killing and raping when the fruit of the Spirit is in full bloom. It is the way of Jesus.

Like patience, kindness frees us from the energy of hostility or the heated outbursts of anger. Kind people, like God, are slow to anger. As we cultivate kindness in us, also grows an awareness of God's presence with us. Then we can accept other people with their limitations and hard battles they fight and wounds they bear. We don't have to approve of harmful things that others do but we can accept them as they are and be ready to help whenever possible - without trying to change them.

In a study of thirty-seven cultures around the world 16,000 people were asked about their most desired traits in a mate. For both sexes, the first preference was kindness. (The second was intelligence). We want kind people. Paul told us to first put on compassion, then kindness, then humility, then gentleness, then patience. Above all, wear love, wrapped with forgiveness. What a wardrobe!

A kind person is kind with himself or herself... content, even, with our inability to change ourselves as we would like while continuing to do what one can to improve, relying more and more on God's grace.

- What would happen if we took Glenn Campbell's advice and tried a little kindness?
- What would happen to us, in us, and through us if through our touch, our smile, our listening ear, we kindly accepted that Jesus is living in us?
- What would happen if we joined the world-wide revolution of kindness?

There are dozens of websites devoted just to kindness, where people share with the world some random act of kindness they received or performed.

You can read those stories for about an hour and have to quit because your heart is too full and your eyes are too full and grace spills all over the place. Greed, hate, corruption, and cowardice have no room in the face of kindness.

For example:

Last week 1,350 women of all ages and abilities in England walked 13 miles overnight in the dark and driving rain to raise £165,896.00 for the local hospice. 90 volunteers administered the event working from 9pm Saturday 21 to Sunday 22 6am. A very moving good deed for all who took part.

Yesterday a woman in Australia wrote:

I was heading out of my local ice cream parlour when I noticed a homeless guy rummaging through the bin outside (eating scraps). My children could not believe what they were witnessing. I walked over to the fellow and handed him some money. He could not look at me, but thanked me graciously. He then hurriedly went inside the ice cream parlour & brought himself something decent to eat. I felt wonderful for days after this incident occurred & so did my children.

A girl wrote:

There is a family in my neighborhood where the mother has no job. Neither does the father. They have two kids. They have barely any money to buy groceries for the family. My mother heard that they could not pay the bill at the butcher. So, my Mom paid the bill and went to the supermarket and bought them a few food vouchers to buy groceries with. She put it in an envelope and put it in their postbox without a name.

Somebody from Chico in the US wrote:

My older neighbor had a dangerous pine tree cut down in his front yard. He could not afford to have the company haul it away. My husband and I drove our pick-up over when he was gone and hauled it off for him.

And somebody in Mumbai, India wrote:

Other day I was on way to office. At one turning point, a vehicle from the opposite direction wanted to turn right but no vehicle from my side was allowing him to cross the road to turn right. It was a rush hour and the traffic was moving very slow. The stretch of less than half KM took me 20 minutes to reach the point where vehicle wanting to turn right was stranded. I immediately stopped and allowed the vehicle to take right turn. The person behind the wheel was so impressed by the gesture that he waved to me and gave a flying kiss. I hope helping others not only makes you happy but inspires others also to help others.

Ahh, there's the secret of it: kindness makes you happy but it spreads happiness to others. It is the antidote to the poison of violence and hatred.

Going out on a limb means taking risks. We can be kind and be rejected or misunderstood. We may have to suffer for deeds of mercy and steadfast love. God knows. God has. But the best things of life require taking risks. Risking for the kindness of Jesus, we could change the world. The more kindly we become the more connected with God's great lovingkindness. It's a revolution.

Diana Butler Bass, a church historian, got a Lily Foundation grant and studied fifty mainline churches that showed signs of vitality. Some were

new, some were old. They were big and small, rich and poor, Anglo and minority. The first thing all of those thriving churches had in common was that their members practiced hospitality and kindness.

Some of the kindest people I have ever known are members of this church. You do so many acts of kindness that anyone can see Christ in you. The thing is, the ones most likely to do those things are the very people who least would call attention to yourselves and that is as it should be.

However, it leaves us, as a congregation, in the dilemma of having our light hid under a basket. We practice hospitality and acts of kindness, but if others needing the gospel of Jesus who transforms life don't know about it then we don't thrive. So, tell somebody about your church. Tell somebody who does not know Jesus how it is to be part of a fellowship where people are gentle with each other for the kindness of caring deeply. Invite somebody who knows rudeness and violence inside where the sweet fruit of the Holy Spirit flowers and life is good. Hard battles - they're everywhere. Jesus teaches kindness on that battlefield. Thanks be to God!