

The Gifts of Generosity and Self-Control

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on the Fourth Sunday of Lent – March 14, 2021
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: 2 Corinthians 9:11-15 & 2 Peter 1:5-8

Welcome once again to our continuing Lenten exploration of the “fruits of the Spirit” identified by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Just as a refresher, his list includes “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Thus far we talked about love, joy and peace on the first Sunday of Lent. Then we spent an entire reflection on just patience the second Sunday of Lent. Last Sunday we combined kindness and gentleness for our mutual ponderings on the third Sunday of Lent. That brings us to today, the fourth Sunday of Lent and once again, time constraints mean that we will be looking at two of Paul’s “fruits” at the same time, generosity and self-control. These two traits or virtues, or “fruits of the Spirit” to Paul’s way of thinking, might not be the most obvious to pair, and yet, as we look below the surface, the richness of our friend Paul’s wisdom once again becomes visible.

Before we move on to that discussion, though, I want to revisit this whole notion of “fruits of the Spirit.” What exactly does Paul mean by this? It’s one of those metaphors that I’m sure made a lot of sense to him, and perhaps he was confident his immediate audience – the folks in the churches he founded throughout the Mediterranean world at the time – would be quick to understand what he meant. Be that as it may, we are now almost 2000 years beyond the time when Paul sent quill to parchment and his intent may not be quite so clear to us in the 21st century. We tend to think of fruit quite literally, and I am guessing that word conjures up a different fruit in the minds of each of us. Perhaps what pops into your head is an exotic one like dragonfruit or even pineapple. Perhaps it’s more mundane like apples or oranges or grapes or bananas. Whatever your favorite fruit, the fruit itself is not and never was Paul’s point. What he meant by “fruits of the Spirit” was the notion that when you become a Christian and live into the reality of what it means to live as Jesus taught, you are transformed into a whole new person. As the “new you” grows and matures in the faith by studying it with others, by praying regularly, by caring for others as Jesus commanded, then you yourself will deepen in faith and wisdom and knowledge of God. As this personal faith growth happens, continually transforming you from who you were before you knew the Good News of Jesus to who you are becoming as you are immersed in that Good news, you literally bear the fruits of that transformation

of your being. This means you are someone for whom Paul's "fruits of the Spirit" just become part of who you are and how you respond to the others in your life. These "fruits" literally become both the proof of your ongoing transformation AND the spiritual food that nourishes others who are also in the process of transformation but are not as far along the journey as you are. Makes sense when we think about it this way, right? Paul is saying as you grow in faith, that growth is reflected in everything about you, like apples flourishing on a healthy tree or grapes flourishing on a healthy vine. This fruit you "are" now becomes spiritual food for the people making the journey of faith with you. It's really an incredible concept when we stop to look at it as more than a list Paul wrote down randomly one day. It truly lays out a roadmap to becoming a follower of Jesus in a whole new way, not only by what you testify to as a Christian, but also, and just as importantly Paul says, by what you do. My dad had a similar idea to Paul's but he put it in a much more American way: "what you say speaks so loud, I can't hear a word you're saying."

I wanted us to refresh our collective memories on this whole concept of Paul's fruits of the spirit because these two I am discussing today – generosity and self-control – might seem on the surface to be more in tension with each other than the others we have talked about this far. I mean, really, if we're hoping someone is going to be generous, do we really also hope they will exercise self-control in their giving? Doesn't that mean they will "count the cost" of their giving as a precursor to determining just how generous they can "afford" to be? To our 21st century way of thinking, especially in the capitalistic culture of the United States, I think this is precisely how we see these two traits – not as working together so much as working at odds with each other. But, is that Paul was thinking about here? No, not really.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians gives us a better understanding of his thinking around generosity. For Paul the value of generosity as a fruit of the Spirit is that it produces thanksgiving to God. How does it do this? Well, certainly the person on the receiving end of a generous act is thankful and it is not too much of a stretch to think that thankfulness extends to the divine, whether or not the person is a person of faith. But Paul insists that the one being generous is also giving thanksgiving to God. Why? Simple! They have the resources to be generous! So, to Paul's way of thinking, both the one receiving generosity and the one providing it are deepening their connection to God by being profoundly grateful, thankful, to God. But, Paul doesn't stop there. Paul

then observes this act of generosity which produces thankfulness to God then also leads to more generosity which leads to more thankfulness to God expressed through prayer and compassion and caring for others which leads to more generosity and so on and so on. It literally becomes a self-renewing cycle of generosity as an act of love growing out of one's ever deepening relationship with God. This is why Paul says, "Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!" The gift of generosity, to Paul, is literally a gift which keeps on giving and as it does, it brings more and more people to the awareness of God's presence in the world and one's life. Amazing!

But where does the whole self-control thing fit into this situation? Well, this is where the 2nd letter of Peter gives us some important insights. One important point to note here is that though this letter claims to be written by Simon Peter – yes, that Simon Peter, the "upon this rock I will build my church" Simon Peter – it was most likely not written by that Peter. Scholars believe this for several reasons. One is that the letter reflects the reality of a later period in history, after Simon Peter had died. Another is that in style and content, it is very similar to Paul's writings rather than to Peter's. In fact, it presupposes in some places a familiarity with Paul's writings, something Peter would never have encouraged. Therefore, scholars believe this letter is just another example of what was a common practice at this time in history – someone writing something in someone else's name because they know it will receive a broader reading because of the name association.

Anyhow, on to what this brief text from 2nd Peter tells us about the concept of self-control. This author wastes no time in telling us that self-control is one of the foundational pieces of developing and deepening one's faith. Again, we see this cyclical process of the deepening of faith articulated in detail: "you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness and goodness with knowledge and knowledge with self-control and self-control with endurance and endurance with godliness and godliness with mutual affection and mutual affection with love." This is significant! You must *support your faith* with each of these qualities, layered one on top of the other and working in tandem with each other at the same time, all of them leading to the ultimate goal of unreserved love – love of God and love of the other. Sound familiar? It should because Jesus said it first – you are to love God with all that you are and all that you have, and you are to love your neighbor as yourself. "On this hangs all the law and the prophets," Jesus said.

So how does self-control connect back to generosity, our question for this morning? Allow me to share a brief story in the way of an illustration. I think most of you will remember when Hurricane Irene hit our area back in August 2011. That was the time when you all were in search and, in fact, Lynn and I were in communication at that time about my interviews, etc. We tend to forget Irene because it was followed the next year by Hurricane Sandy. Sandy devastated New Jersey, Long Island and New York but Irene was very damaging right here. Everyone in coastal New England lost power for a long time. At my house in East Providence, we were without power for 10 days! It was awful, but we made it through, developing new routines and, in our case, new relationships with our neighbors. There are a lot of vignettes I could share from our neighborhood during this ten day time frame but I want to talk about one incident in particular because it directly illustrates the connection between generosity and self-control. The power disruption in our neighborhood was uneven meaning only half of our block was without power. When the power was not restored within a day or two, my neighbor down the street who still had power went out and bought a whole lot of outdoor power cords and he proceeded to run them down the street to us and others of the neighbors. He did this because he didn't want to see us lose all the food in our refrigerators. It was amazing and he never would let us pay him back for what I am confident was an astronomical electric bill. But there is another part to the story. My next door neighbor Steve didn't need the power cord connection because he had a generator – a big one – and he ran it to power his fridg, some of his lights and one television. He ran it all the time. There were lots of other people in the neighborhood doing the same thing and pretty soon we all got used to hum of generators. Everyone, that is, except for Ralph. Interestingly, Ralph lived directly across the street from the generous Kevin but Ralph was not at all generous. In fact, Ralph was a jerk. Ralph actually came over to Steve's house and told him (didn't ask, told) to stop running the generator all the time because he hadn't lost power and found the noise of the generator quite annoying. I will leave it to your imagination what Steve's response was.

What I learned from this experience, and what I share with you this morning, is that generosity and self-control are literally neighbors living in the same neighborhood which is you. Kevin's generosity was literally overwhelming for those of us whose freezer contents were spared. Ralph's lack of self-control directly reflected his total lack of empathy and compassion literally for his neighbor. By the way, Ralph occasionally went to church. Kevin did not. These

two are living examples of Paul's thinking about the connection between generosity and self-control. For Paul, generosity was required of someone who had enough abundance to be generous. In fact, Paul believed that abundance brought with it the responsibility of being generous, no matter who it was that needed help. He was flat out rejecting the common belief of the dominant Greek philosophy at that time which held self-sufficiency in all circumstances as the most desirable trait. Sound familiar? The thing is that for Paul, God is the only basis for self-sufficiency and God's self-sufficiency demands love of the other. This notion is further developed in 2nd Peter which is actually an invitation to exchange the harsh and corrupt world we know all too well for God's realm. We enact this exchange by deepening our knowledge of God, trusting the promises of God and using this knowledge and faith to empower ourselves in our striving to live as God desires for us to live.

Paul recognized that self-control was necessary in order for generosity to happen in the first place because it is self-control that enables us to move beyond our own selfish perspectives and embrace as fully as we can the unbounded love of God. When it comes to generosity and self-control we literally cannot practice one without the other. Who knew? Paul did, and now you do too. But can you do it? That, dear ones, is totally up to you. Amen.