

Sept. 9, 2018  
1 John 4:7-21  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## ***Fruit of the Spirit: Love***

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

This fall we are looking at the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5, where there is a list of 9 characteristics of living in the Spirit. Each week we will be hearing another scripture that highlights the fruit of the Spirit for that day.

Today's word is Love. As our opening hymn says, *They will know we are Christians by our love.* When we use the word God, we often mean different things. The writer of 1 John is clear that what he means by the word God is LOVE.

Last week I spoke about the challenges of translations. This is particularly true of the word Love. Our English word love has to carry a multiplicity of meanings. In biblical Greek there are three primary words that we translate as love.

- eros – romantic love
- philia – friendship love
- agape – self-giving love

The Greek word in 1 John is agape – a love that cares for the other as much as the self – a love that never ends.

### SERMON

We talked last week about how the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Galatians contrasts living in the Spirit with living in the flesh. The translation using the word “flesh” has been highly problematic over the centuries. Someone I read suggested that to better understand what Paul meant by “flesh” we could substitute the word ego, a word that didn't exist in Paul's day. I find that very helpful.

The primary question of unrestrained ego is  
*What's in it for me?*

Whereas, a life attuned to the Spirit asks  
*How does my life affect Life itself?*

The unrestrained ego cares only about the self; whereas the mature ego in tune with the Spirit cares about the self but also hears the call of the common good.

Last week after church someone told me that in AA the word EGO is considered an acronym for *easing God out*. So that means that while life centered in ego eases God out; life centered in the Spirit eases God in.

If we are easing God in, living in the Spirit, then one of the things we will notice in our lives is Love – agape – expressions of self giving love.

Each week in church school the children will be having a literal fruit for snack as they explore the same word for the fruit of the Spirit that we are reflecting on. Today they will be having apples.

Tis the season of apples. I like the early macs that make your face pucker with their tartness. Apples are not only delicious and nutritious -

*An apple a day keeps the doctor away.*

They are also highly symbolic:

*As American as apple pie.*

*You are the apple of my eye.*

They also have often been used as the symbol of forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden in western art. The Bible doesn't name the forbidden fruit as an apple. I suspect artists chose to use it because the bright red catches your eye in the painting.

I like that for today apples will remind our children of love – for apples are a fruit that we can easily share.

The love that Paul and the writer of 1 John are talking about is agape – the expression of love where we give of ourselves for the well being of others.

Sometimes this self giving love is very dramatic. On National Public Radio yesterday, I heard an interview with Bobi Wine, a Ugandan politician and musician. He was tortured by soldiers in his country and allowed to come here for medical treatment. Although many people have been advising him to stay in the U.S. he intends to return to his country because it is his home and because he believes the concerns are bigger than just his safety. Well aware of the dangers, he said, *If my*

*life has to be a sacrifice for the redemption of my country, so be it.*

It is that same kind of self sacrificing love that caused Jesus to turn his face to Jerusalem and keep riding into the city well aware of the dangers. 1 John affirms that we see the agape love of God – the self-giving love of God – primarily in Jesus the Christ. The central testimony is that Jesus is *the atoning sacrifice for our sins*. This is a powerful proclamation that has sometimes been used in highly problematic ways over the centuries.

However, at the time this was written, it spoke to a couple of realities:

-it resonates with the practices of atoning sacrifice that were central to the Jewish temple worship

-it contrasts with some of the Gnostics of his day who argued that Jesus wasn't really in the flesh, so he didn't really die. The writer is making it clear that Jesus was real!

Jesus' agape love says

*If my life has to be a sacrifice for the redemption of my people, so be it.*

Although self giving, agape, love can be very dramatic; sometimes it is much quieter, such as with the practice of prayer.

In our local paper this week there was an article about eight teenagers who recently did a pilgrimage from Augusta to Bangor (70 miles) during which they prayed for people struggling with addiction and depression.

Prayer is one of the central actions of agape love. In prayer we tune our spirit to God's Spirit so we can live more fully in the Spirit.

At one of the labyrinth services this summer I shared the story *Grandad's Prayers of the Earth* by Douglas Wood. It is the true story of the author's relationship with his grandad. At one point they are talking about prayer and the boy asks his grandad *Are our prayers answered, Grandad?*

His grandad responded,  
*Most prayers are not really questions. If we listen very closely, a prayer is often its own answer. Like the trees and winds and waters, we pray because we are here – not to change the world, but to change ourselves.*

*Because it is when we change ourselves...that the world is changed.*

That's agape.