

Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

June 27, 2010

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

“The Fruit of the Spirit”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

When I was in Divinity School I heard this piece of advice from a preaching professor: “There are two ways to preach a good sermon. Either you begin on Main Street in your town and end in Jerusalem. Or you begin in Jerusalem and end on Main Street in your town.”

Meaning...and I guess it is obvious...start with where you are, what is relevant to YOUR congregation and end up with Jesus.

OR start with Jesus and end up with your congregation.

Today I am hoping there is a third way to preach a good sermon...I am hoping. Because I am starting with OUR congregation and weaving Jesus more specifically Jesus’ apostle Paul throughout the message!

Today I want to mark with appreciation and reverence the church year we have just completed together. Because our church is closed in July, this is our last Sunday together in worship until August. I want to reflect with you on the meaning of today’s Scripture reading from the Book of Galatians AND look back with you on a remarkable church year spent working and worshiping as one church family.

First a look at the passage from Galatians...

Paul is writing a letter or an epistle to the early Christian community in the Roman province of Galatia in central Anatolia. In our passage for today, Paul is working hard to explain to the early Christians how to live, what to value and how to behave. Some Biblical scholars believe that Paul was agitated when he wrote this letter. Maybe he was. He certainly uses some strong language in the letter. Paul seems to want to reach through the words on the page, grab and shake those early Christians in Galatia. He seems to be saying...get with it, don’t you understand? Don’t give in to your vices and lowest impulses, live a righteous life. He is saying quite clearly: don’t do this, do THIS.

Paul does not mince words or make gentle suggestions. No, he tells those Christians quite clearly what to do avoid: impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, faction, envy, drunkenness, carousing...and the list goes on! Instead, he says, live so that the **fruits of the Spirit** are evident in your behavior. And what, according to the apostle Paul, are the fruits of the spirit? Nine specific characteristics evident in the life of a righteous and holy person: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Praying on this passage this week and thinking about the end of another church year with all of you, I began to roll around in my mind how Paul's list of the fruits of the spirit are evident in the way YOU my church family live and the things YOU do. Paul's fruits of the spirit—one could say spiritual qualities and practices—are evident to me in YOUR actions, words, behaviors and choices.

Let's now look back on this past year AND what Paul calls the "fruits of the spirit" and see how these spiritual qualities and practices have been evident in the life of this church family.

The first in Paul's list of the fruits of the spirit is LOVE.

I have seen that spiritual quality and practice revealed this past year in how this church family has loved and cared for the church's children;

Your love for one another has also been evident in your tender care for one another as demonstrated through visits to each other in times of need, your faithful prayers for one another, how you have appeared at each other's doorsteps with meals when needed;

Each week during this past year, I saw your love for your church evident in your volunteering endless hours working on committees, projects, church events;

I witnessed your love during our special LGBT service in May during which it was clear that this congregation has moved so far beyond tolerance, so far beyond acceptance of our LGBT brothers and sisters, you all love and cherish your lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered brothers and sisters;

I saw your deep well of love in your care of our Phyllis Webb, with Nancy and Will as models of loving care and concern;

Also with Ginny Daggett, with Charlotte and Judy at the forefront of loving care and concern

Also with Linda Small and Ann Podolske with so many church members involved in their circle of support.

I see LOVE, one of Paul's fruits of the spirit, in your daily behaviors and this moves me deeply—you have taught me so much.

The second of the fruits of the spirit is Joy.

Each Sunday this past year I have seen your joy as you greeted one another in the dining room and sanctuary before church began;

I have seen your joy during New Members ceremonies when we have welcomed new people to our church family and you have sung to them with such delight;

I have witnessed your joy when you cannot help yourselves and you burst into spontaneous applause when good news is shared during joys and concerns and you rejoice with members of your church family;

I have seen your joy when you have held and played with the triplets;

I saw your pride and joy this spring at Matt Dunphy Phinney's amazing organ concert at our church;

I witnessed your joy at Coni's Baptism on Easter Sunday;

I felt your joy at Tom McCabe's storytelling evening at the church and Susan Farrell's concert this month;

I shared your joy at Jo and Jackie's beautiful wedding a few weeks ago.

You are unafraid to feel and express your JOY, one of Paul's fruits of the spirit.

The third of the fruits of the spirit is Peace.

I am so proud of the all the work you do to promote peace and justice.

The efforts of the Peace and Justice Steering Committee, and the Charity to Change cross-class group, and at the Cot Shelter program in Northampton;

I saw in January and in years past the impact the annual Martin Luther King Day Service has on our community;

I was moved by the talks this year by Michael Klare and Randy Kehler who spoke to us about the roots of war and the ways of nonviolence;

I saw your commitment to justice when some 60 of you marched singing and waving rainbow flags through Northampton at the annual Gay Pride March;

I see, feel and appreciate your ongoing commitment to peace and justice and how you hold high that banner and carry that torch.

The fourth of Paul's fruits of the spirit is patience.

I witnessed your patience this past year during the long and sometimes hard and sometimes boring committee meetings that you participated in with open hearts and minds;

I saw this year the hard work done by the Trustees, the Deacons, the Capital Campaign Committee, and the Children's Church Committee;

I experienced your patience as you planned the liturgical year, organized special services, studied budgets, hired contractors and interviewed painters—the list of the good work done in committees this year goes on and on and on.

I also saw your patience demonstrated in the discussions in the new group Catholics in the UCC. I saw you struggle with old wounds and lift up the gifts you received from the Catholic Church. I witnessed your patience as you read, met, cried, talked and worked through old feelings with deep honesty, respect and love.

The fifth of the fruits of the spirit is kindness.

So often this past year I observed your quiet acts of kindness including those of you who scribbled on your Bulletins each Sunday during Joys and Concerns and later called people facing hard times;

I heard about the simple but profound acts of kindness when so many of you this past year went out of your way to pick someone up for church or drove church members to medical appointments;

I know that this past year many of you visited people in nursing homes and some of you sang to those you visited;

And I have seen how this year in particular you cared with loving kindness for church members and friends who lost family members.

You have warm and expansive hearts, and you do many thanked and unthanked acts of kindness each week. Bless you.

The sixth of Paul's fruits of the spirit is generosity.

This fruit of the spirit is evident weekly in church during our Offering.

We are not a rich church but we are without question a generous church.

You gave generously throughout this past church year through your pledging to the church PLUS you gave to the myriad of other offerings we have collected over the past twelve months...including our Capital Campaign to paint the church and do needed structural repairs, Blankets of Hope, Tools of Change, One Great Hour of Sharing, Stockings for Change, the collection for Willot's trip to Haiti, the scholarship funds for church members and friends to attend Church Summer Camp on Cape Cod in August. And that is just a sampling. You have consistently engaged in remarkable acts of generosity.

Plus we all see the remarkable giving of the Ladies Aid. The fruit of the spirit is so evident there...the Ladies Aid raises money through real sweat equity and gives it away.

Generosity...this fruit of the spirit is evident in deeply moving ways in this church.

The seventh of the fruits of the spirit is faithfulness.

You are a faithful group and there are many many examples of your faithfulness this past year.

How Phyllis, Linda and Ann lived and faced their deaths with courage and love was rooted in faithfulness.

I also think of your faithful activities on our Blue Moon Sunday community projects this past year.

I saw your faithfulness in action when some of you came during Lent to walk the sacred labyrinth in silence.

I am also thinking back on the large and faithful group that met during the cold winter evenings for home church at Gloria Ayvazian's house and how over many weeks we studied the Lord's Prayer and then the 23rd Psalm.

Your faithfulness was evident in our Church Book Group that met month after month to pray, talk, discuss the book we had read.

And I am thinking about the faithful crew, some 20 of you, that dedicated yourselves to the Living the Questions DVD series over several months and then the crew that committed to the First Light series over 12 weeks.

With this congregation, the examples of faithfulness could go on and on.

The eighth of Paul's fruits of the spirit is gentleness.

Our intern this past year, Cherylann Richards, demonstrated such gentleness with her soft and sweet touch with Children's Church and our youth.

This fruit of the spirit was evident this year in the behind-the-scenes, quiet and caring work of our church Shepherds who met with countless people in need and offered spiritual companionship.

This fruit of the spirit was also demonstrated through the actions of the MEN in this church. It takes a special man to worship in a church that is predominately women and has two women pastors. The men in our congregation are remarkably gentle and sensitive.

The gentleness in this congregation is one of the things I treasure about you, and your gentleness was in evidence all year long.

And the final final of Paul's fruits of the spirit is self-control.

And I think your self-control is high on the list of what keeps us together.

It is hard to worship and work in a close-knit community—there are many opportunities to say, I have had enough, not everything is going my way, I am tired now and need to step back, move on, check out.

Community is demanding, volunteering in an active and growing church takes up a lot of time. Haydenville is long distance from South Hadley, Amherst, Holyoke, Plainfield, Easthampton and other communities where our church members live!

But your commitment to God and to each other and your self-control has made you, this year and in years past, take a deep breath when things get hard, settle into prayer, stay the course and show up again—for worship, for programs, for meals, for events.

In community, we strive to make the center hold. Because God is at our center, we practice self-control when we get angry or are tempted to walk about. We want the center to hold. Paul named self-control as one of the fruits of the spirit. And I say: bless your good big hearts for practicing self-control when the going got tough. You kept God at the center and you stayed in community.

Those are Paul's nine fruits of the spirit and a brief glimpse of how YOU, my church family, have demonstrated those fruits of the spirit this past year.

We have had a spectacular year together. Nothing short of that. A spectacular year together and I don't use that word often. Your abundant spiritual gifts, the fruits of the spirit, are visible in the way you live, the choices you make, the things you say, the way you give, and how you keep God at the center of our lives together.

Billy Graham once said:

"Being a Christian is more than just an instantaneous conversion. It is a daily process whereby you grow to be more and more like Christ."

This year I watched you grow more and more like Christ. The spiritual gifts you manifest, the very ones that Paul wrote to the early Christians about two millennia ago, those spiritual gifts, you demonstrate in the way you live your lives.

I am proud to be a part of this church family.
I learn so much from you each year.

This year I was particularly able to see Paul's fruits of the spirit manifest in your actions.

Because of you I am growing wiser and more deeply caring.
Because of you I am growing closer to God.

Thank you for the way you live the fruits of the spirit.
And I will miss you when we are apart.
Take good care of yourself and each other.

And may God continue to bless you and keep you.
I love you all. Amen.