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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, Psalm 66:1-12; Luke 17:11-19
“The Harvest of the Spirit”

The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22 and 23)

From our pew Bible, we know this as the fruit of spirit. The New English Bible replaces fruit with harvest. For this time of the year that sounds good. The sermon today is a spelling out of this amazing cornucopia.

My drive to work on Monday started out like any other day. It was an ordinary drive and I felt okay. At a point on the San Rafael/Richmond Bridge I recited the harvest of the spirit. When I said “joy” I perked up. It suddenly felt really good to be a Christian and to affirm the joy I have in Christ.

Joy permeated by entire being. I was grateful for my faith, family, church, the San Francisco Bay Area, everything! It was a joy to be alive. As I recited the rest of fruit I realized that I had not preached on the entire harvest in one sermon.

In the larger passage, Galatians 5:19-23, Paul presents conventional ethical formulas: vice and virtue lists. Teachers of ethics in Paul’s day liked to enumerate features of bad and good conduct. The harvest or fruit of the spirit is spontaneous. Though Paul includes such typical Greek virtues as humility (translated as gentleness) and self-control, items in his list have theological significance: “peace” for example depicts the new relationship the believer has with God and “love” is the fundamental force of the entire ethic.

The words in the list quite likely had different meanings in first century Mediterranean culture. All I can do is take these words within my own biblical understanding and theological development and communicate their meaning the best I can in our century and context.

Here then, a sermon on the harvest of the spirit.

First, the harvest of the spirit is love... 1 John 4 has probably the best expression of love in the Bible. He writes: God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them...There is no fear in love, for

perfect love drives out fear...If you say you love God but hate your sister or brother, you are a liar. For you cannot love God, whom you have not seen, if you hate your neighbor, whom you have seen. If we love God, we should love our sisters and brothers as well.

Probably the best way to grasp love is to tell a story. The one that comes to mind was written in December 2005 in the San Francisco Chronicle. I read it for the first time last week. It was sent to me online.

It's about a 45 to 50-foot female humpback whale that was horribly tired up and caught in crab nets off the Farallon Islands. It struggled for hours to keep its blow-hole out of the water.

A call came to the mainland – to Novato here in Marin – at 8:30 am and divers were quickly called and rushed to the scene. They arrived at 2:30 pm, surveyed the situation and decided to cut the ropes. They would do so at great risk for one whisk of the tail could kill them.

Parts of the rope were already cutting into the whale's blubber. The whale swayed gently while the cutting took place. One diver speaks of cutting near the eye and the eye caught his eye and winked at him. He called it an unforgettable, epic experience.

Finally, the ropes fell away. When the whale realized it was free, it began swimming around in circles. It swam to each diver, nuzzled him and then swam to the next one. Whale experts say it's nice to think that the whale was thanking its rescuers, but nobody really knows what was on its mind.

An educated theological guess is that the whale reciprocated the love she received from these brave divers. They loved her in risking their lives to save her and she loved them in return with affection and appreciation.

The harvest of the spirit is joy... The Psalmist sings: "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing glory to God's name and give God glorious praise" The psalmist gives a reason for this joy later in the poem: "Come and see what God has done: God is awesome in God's deeds among mortals. God turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in God." The Psalmist remembers the passage from slavery to liberation. That's cause for joy in anybody's book.

Christian philosopher, mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal described a central experience in his life by writing, "From about half past ten in the evening to about half an hour after midnight. Fire...Absolute certainty: Beyond reason. Joy. Peace. Forgetfulness of the world and everything but God...Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of joy!"

Joy is our inheritance as Christians. It's good to feel it and know it even when the economy, election politics, environmental trends, you name it, want to drag us down. "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" set us on the right track today.

The harvest of the spirit is peace. The sermon on World Communion/ Peace Offering Sunday – last week – said a fair amount about peace.

It described Jesus as the supreme peacemaker. He taught, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." He says: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." His first words to his disciples in the resurrection are: "Peace be with you." He calms the storm with the words: "Peace, be still."

We are called to follow Jesus as peacemakers.

The harvest of the spirit is patience. Two areas test one's patience today. One is starting one's computer and waiting for the home page and links to open. It's the "watched kettle never boils" syndrome. The other area – where patience is a virtue – is driving in the Bay Area and it's getting more and more difficult. It helps to be patient. Christians have no problems because patience is a fruit of the spirit. Yea, right!

The harvest of the spirit is kindness. Speaking for God, Jeremiah encourages kindness when he exhorts the exiles to, "...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

It is tough to be in exile anywhere. God says through Jeremiah: Make the most of it, be positive and kind and what you put out will come back to you.

The harvest of the spirit is generosity. You are one of the most generous groups of people I have encountered anywhere. This is a wonderful sign that you are in the spirit.

The harvest of the spirit is faithfulness. The gospel story today is a strange one. Ten lepers call out to Jesus for mercy. Jesus instructs them to visit the priest and they go and on the way they are healed. One turns back to thank Jesus and Jesus says, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'"

We don't know how this man's faith was different from the others but we do know that he believed in Jesus and was healed. When Jesus affirms his faith he means that his life in faith will continue to heal and benefit him.

One of the best definitions of faith in the Bible is found in the New Testament book Hebrews. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." One needs faith to believe this.

Other versions of the Bible translate faith as fidelity or trustfulness.

The harvest of the spirit is gentleness. Someone implied to me this week that gentleness was the opposite of anger. Scripture says it's okay to be angry but the sun should not set on our anger. For men and women, our rightful place is gentleness.

Last Wednesday, I attended the open house of the Center for Domestic Peace, formerly the Marin Abused Women's Services (MAWS). I enquired about their "ManKind" program. I mentioned to their executive director Donna Garske that I liked the name "ManKind:" a "kind" man. She replied: "Imagine that!" Kindness in this sense is next to gentleness from which comes the name "gentleman."

The Phillips Modern English Bible translates gentleness as tolerance. Gentleness and tolerance make a good pair in interreligious dialogue or in conversation with any who differ from us – so long as we are not a push-over. Gentle but firm.

Finally, the harvest of the spirit is self-control. This is a good one for teens. Suellen works with teens at risk and if only they claimed the spirit of self-control they wouldn't get into half the trouble they do. They certainly wouldn't land up in Juvenile Hall.

It's generally not appropriate to tell another adult to exercise self control. However, I go along with Paul who boldly affirms the value of self-control – and then I figure out how that applies to my life. I do my best to practice self-control.

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

Paul concludes: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." The New English Bible states: "If the spirit is the source of our life, let the spirit also direct our course." One way to let the spirit direct our course is to memorize the list and recite it wherever we are as I did this

week on the San Rafael/Richmond Bridge and be transported to wherever the spirit leads. Amen.