

A Generous Helping of Fruit

Text: Matthew 5:38-42

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 14, 2021

Paul is a very precise writer, as you might expect from someone who rose through the ranks of Jewish legal experts to become a Pharisee. So I'm absolutely sure that when Paul made his list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, he had distinct traits in mind for each thing. Unfortunately, when you travel forward 2,000 years and take a dead language like Classical Greek and translate it into English, all of that nuance can be hard to capture. So, yes, my friends, it's time for another episode of "Bible Word Nerds!"

I started this week looking at the New Revised Standard Version of the list and wondering why they translated one of the words as "generosity," when almost everyone other translation uses the word, "goodness." So I started checking the Greek. Ha. Good old Paul. The Greek word Paul uses here is a very particular form of the basic word for "good." It's so particular, in fact, that the word occurs nowhere else in all of Classical Greek literature outside of the Bible. It's used four times in the New Testament, and all four uses are by Paul.

As I dug further, I found that the word was considered a synonym for "kindness." But Paul had just listed "kindness" as the fruit right before it. I went to look at that different word for "kindness" and saw that it was sometimes translated as "goodness" and sometimes as "gentleness," which is yet another word in Paul's list. I will spare you the details of my trip down several linguistic rabbit holes and just say that we're getting a whole fruit *basket* this morning with kindness, goodness, and gentleness in it; and I want to make the case that if you mix the three together in a fruit salad, it will taste like generosity.

The rabbit hole where I actually found a rabbit was in researching the word for "kindness." In Greek it is *chrestotes* and the list of meanings included "excellent, useful, good, orderly, healthy, worthy, honest," and other like-words. But the difference between how it the word is used in the Bible and how it was used in ancient Greek culture is much more interesting.

In the Bible, the word is used mostly in reference to God or as a godly virtue as we see in Paul's fruit of the Spirit list. But to the ancient Greek Stoics, this kindness, this *chrestotes*, was a weakness, a flaw, something unworthy of God. So, while the early Christians were teaching *chrestotes*—kindness—as a virtue, the Stoics were encouraging their followers to buck up and not be such wusses.

It's a clash in values that has never really gone away, and when you dig into the word a little more, the resonance with our time becomes more obvious. *Chrestotes* doesn't just mean any old kindness. In the Bible and in Christian teaching, *chrestotes* refers specifically to the kind and loving acts that God bestows on the ungrateful, the selfish, the sinner. It's the act that responds to evil with grace, that turns the other cheek, goes the second mile, gives the shirt *and* the cloak, that offers forgiveness even to those who have nailed you to a cross.

To the Greek Stoics, compassion was a sign of weakness, and being compassionate toward those they considered undeserving was lower yet. That was being soft with evil, and they would have none of it. They would not worship a God who refused to simply step up to the plate and obliterate the wicked. There are modern Stoics, both inside and outside the church. For them it's simple. Do wrong; get punished. Leniency just encourages more bad behavior.

Sit with that for a minute and you can see that the disdain for this particular fruit can be found right now, across the political spectrum. No matter what news channel you're watching, they want the other side

ground up into tiny little bits—body and soul. And even here in the church—even our particular church at Crawford—we have that negative view of generous compassion baked into our bank account.

Back in the 60's we received a legacy gift that became an endowed fund for those in need. And while I'm delighted that we have the money to use, I'm troubled by the language used to describe how the fund is to be used. It's money to be used for "the *worthy* poor." Not the unworthy poor, mind you. Nope, nothing for them. Just the worthy poor. The fund wasn't established back in the 19th century so that we can blame it on the quaint language of times gone by. After all, it could actually be a way to emphasize that all of the poor are worthy. But the fund was established in 1968, the year the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. It's hard for me not to hear the dog whistle that defines who merits the title "worthy poor" and who does not in a fund established in the racial turmoil of the 1960's. It sounds to me like merely a racialized version of the old stoic philosophy that opening the doors of *chrestotes* to anyone and everyone demeans the ideal of kindness and reveals the givers as irresponsible chumps.

But to the early Christians, who were able to see all people as sinners in need of God's blessing, bestowing kindness lavishly on saint and sinner alike was not a weakness but a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. To say that God is kind is to say that God forgives; that God loves so extravagantly that even those who have violated God's will can be accepted back home as the father in the parable welcomes the prodigal. Only when we realize our own failings do we understand the power of forgiveness. It is a gift to those who don't deserve it. We have come to call it grace. The power of the gift of *chrestotes* is precisely in giving it to those who don't deserve it—to the "unworthy poor" who are destitute of hope, love, and the compassion of others.

It's only as we spend time with God and experience the kindness of God in the midst of our own sins and failures that we begin to become kind ourselves. We begin to understand that turning the other cheek is not a capitulation to evil but a triumph over it, and that offering kindness to those without regard to merit is a radical act of hope in the salvation of God and the basic goodness of humanity. If you really want to proclaim your belief in the Creation account in Genesis, give up the evolution/creationist debate and simply return evil with good.

Once we have understood the fulness of that word for "kindness" in Paul's list of the fruit of the spirit, we're better poised to understand the very rare formulation of the word "goodness" that comes after it. Whether scholars translate it as "goodness" or "generosity," it implies some kind of action. It isn't just describing a person's condition—she's a "good" person—it's implying that "goodness" is something you proactively do. And following the rich word of *chrestotes* that we just looked at, I'm with the NRSV translators in jumping for the word "generosity" instead of the more generic "goodness."

The kindness of the Stoics was limited and particular. I would call it "stingy" kindness. "Fill out this form and I'll let you know if you qualify for my compassion" kindness. The kindness of the early church was generous kindness, given extravagantly to all, just as God's love is recklessly available to all of us, no matter what we've done, even as recently as in the last hour. Few things got Jesus in as much hot water as giving of his time, attention, and care to those who the religious establishment thought didn't deserve it: The sinners, the tax collectors, the Samaritans.

It may be that with the two words appearing together on the list that they were meant to inform each other. The biblical texts in their original languages don't have punctuation. Translators are the ones who put in the commas and decided that kindness and goodness were two different kinds of fruit. I think there's a good case for linking them together; to understand that our good deeds in the world are not all

that good if they are not given with a generous heart, which is automatically what you get when kind and good deeds are infused with love. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that love is “kind,” it’s the same word, *chrestotes*, and a bunch of the other fruit from Galatians are in that chapter as well.

To side with the Stoics and imply that anyone is unworthy of love is literally to assign them a place among the damned. It is to put ourselves in God’s place as the judge of human souls. And if we do that, we are violating the remaining fruit in this morning’s basket, the equally maligned word “gentleness” or “meekness.” Remember that *chrestotes* is also sometimes translated as “gentleness.” It’s all of a piece, with the word Paul uses for “gentleness” adding an emphasis on humility and non-violence.

The three words together are the picture of a generous spirit—a spirit that gives abundantly in response only to need; a spirit born of the recognition that we are not more or less important in God’s eyes than anyone else and that in the midst of the violent execution of a cross, Jesus still gently asked God to forgive his tormentors and welcomed a sinner to Paradise. When we exercise our self-control to temper our good deeds with a kind and gentle heart—even, and perhaps especially, when our instinct is to make distinctions and return an eye for an eye—we become the living Gospel. We become Christ for others; and in doing so, we brighten the image of God inside of ourselves and call forth the best in those who receive our gifts.

I think Paul sums it up in 2 Corinthians 9, verses 6-15, as he writes the conflicted church in the Greek city of Corinth about an offering he is collecting for the poor of Jerusalem. He writes:

⁶ The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Amen.