

## What's It All About?

Text: I Corinthians 13; Luke 10:25-37

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 21, 2021*

The theme song for the 1960's film "Alfie" asked the question, "What's it all about?" The song was asking about life in general, but as we finish up our look at the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, I think the same question can be asked. We've covered eight of the nine things on Paul's list and have seen how improving any one of them tends to benefit and draw from most of the others. They appear to be growing from the same vine, even if at different rates. Are the qualities Paul identifies as fruit of the Spirit really different things or are they all varieties of a single fruit? Is a faithful life a complex thing with many concepts to understand and practice? or is it just one thing that takes different forms in different circumstances? What's it all about? Can we say for sure?

The song from the movie has an answer. Part of it reads, "As sure as I believe there's a heaven above, Alfie, I know there's something much more—something even non-believers can believe in. I believe in love, Alfie. Without true love we just exist." The answer given to Alfie is the same one Paul gives to us. When Paul thought about the fruit of the Spirit, the very first thing that came to his mind—the first thing on his list—was love. Love is what transforms mere existence into life and makes the Word become incarnate in flesh and blood. It's the answer found in Old and New Testaments alike. How very wise and inclusive of God to make the core of faith something that, as the song says, even non-believers can believe in.

To talk about the fruit of the Spirit is to talk about love, because that's the essential nature of the Spirit. As we've seen, many of the characteristics Paul lists can be deployed without love. A person can be patient and exhibit self-control as they work to destroy a life or a society. We can end up being faithful to a corrupt person or a hateful purpose. We can do kind and good things to manipulate others or to gain rewards for ourselves. But at the front of the list is the one fruit to rule them all—the one thing that determines whether our behavior springs from the Spirit of the God revealed in Jesus or whether it comes from some other source. Love is what it's all about. Love is the thing that makes those qualities specifically fruit of the Spirit of God. Love is the label that assures us that the fruit hasn't been sprayed with a toxic pesticide or painted to look like it's ripe when it isn't or grown in a way that harms the earth or its inhabitants.

The problem with that for us is that while the concept is not complex, actually putting love into practice is hard. We would very much like to process some of that fruit to make it easier to swallow. That is what the lawyer wants to do in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember, the question that frames that parable in Luke is not "Who is my neighbor?" but "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And the answer that Jesus gives is, the answer that the lawyer actually provided to his own question, is "Love." Love is how we inherit eternal life.

With all due respect to the Four Spiritual Laws, fights about the proper way and time to baptize, and heated debates about whether God is clever enough to bless communion elements over the internet, that's the only answer. Love. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Love, as it's lived out in acts of justice and mercy. Love that, lo and behold, can be performed by a Samaritan as well as by a Jew or, as Alfie learned, by a non-believer as well as a believer.

There's a wonderful story from the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers who flourished as hermits in the early centuries of the Christian church. The story is told that Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph, and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and I meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" And the old man stood up, and he stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire. And he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame."

I think what Abba Joseph was trying to say to Abba Lot was "It's nice that you have the spiritual disciplines down well, but the real goal of all of it is love—to become all flame in our love for God and for each other. To become the burning bush that will draw others to us to ask, "how can they burn and burn and yet not be consumed?" To be so completely loving that we don't think twice when we see the wounded by the side of the road. We don't think, "Will I be pure if I touch?" We don't ask, "Did they bring this on themselves?" We don't check to see if they are part of our tribe. We simply go and bind the wounds and pour on wine and oil and take them to the inn. When we fail in that, we fail in everything.

I came to learn that lesson, as unfortunately I learn most of my lessons, the hard way. I was at work. It was my very first adult job at a rare book library at Brown University. For about a week we had been seeing two workmen who were installing an alarm system in all the doors and windows. Towards the end of the week, Thursday to be exact, I started to get that feeling in the pit of my stomach which means either food poisoning or God is trying to say something to me. And I felt that what God was trying to say to me was that I should go to those two young men and to tell them that God loved them and that I loved them.

My answer to God was instantaneous. I said, "No! That's crazy, God." I was newly married, 22 years old. I'm going to go up to two strange young men and say, "I love you?" I don't think so. God and I had this conversation for most of the day, with God urging me on, and me saying, "No, God, you've had a lot of good ideas in your time, but this is not one of them." I did things to occupy myself to get rid of the feeling. I succeeded, and at the end of the day I went home without having embarrassed myself.

Friday morning, I came into work and the staff was buzzing with the news. They said, "Did you hear? Did you see on the news?" I said, "No, what?" They said, "You know those guys who've been coming in all week putting in the alarm system? And you know the shorter one, the sandy-haired one? He never went home last night." He went directly to the Jamestown bridge. And, leaving his car running, he got out and he jumped to his death. He left a note. Can you guess what it said? It said no one loved him.

Can't we get it? Can't we manage to remember what it's really all about? While we argue about who's going to heaven or hell, people are jumping off of bridges for lack of love. While we debate whether the person in the ditch is deserving of help, hate is eating our world from the inside out, especially ravaging communities of color as we saw with the horrific murders targeting Asian women in Atlanta this past week. Can't we get over ourselves and focus on the one and only thing that matters? Can't we work to become all flame?

God knew very early on that we try to make it more complicated, which is why, when God first told us to become all flame back in Deuteronomy 6, we got a pretty weird set of instructions. After God said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength," God didn't just stop there. God told us to put that verse everywhere. To recite it every morning when we wake up, every night when we go to bed, when we are at home, when we are away. "Write it," says God, "on your hand, on your forehead, on the doorpost of your house, and on your gates." That's what's in the mezuzah on the door of a Jewish household and inside the phylacteries on the forehead and left arm of Conservative and Orthodox Jewish men during prayer.

I don't know of any other commandment that God told us to plaster absolutely everywhere, knowing that love was the one thing we had to get right and the one thing that we were so likely to forget or water down or twist. And that's exactly what we did. Right this very minute the world is jumping off bridges and shooting so many people that the bodies literally pile up, while we sit, embarrassed, in our pews. Too many of us are unable to say even the most obvious things, like "Black Lives Matter" and denominations, including ours, are splitting over whether somehow the wrong people are loving each other. Is it any wonder that people stay away in droves? Our flame grows cold.

We have "Be the change" written over the stairs going down to the Sunday School rooms. In order to be the change, we have to first be the love. If we could only focus on becoming all flame, consumed with the love of God and one another, I think our priorities as a church would be very, very different. I think we would stop worrying about who our ministers were blessing and start worrying about who they were cursing. I think we'd stop worrying about who people were loving and start worrying about who they were hating. I think we'd be so completely consumed in being all flame, fanned by the rushing wind of the Spirit of God, that our only concern would be spreading the fire. Christianity was never meant to be a controlled burn. It was meant to be a wildfire.

Square one in the Christian faith and in all of life is love. If you've missed it, you've got to go back. Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200, go back and start over. "If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so that I can remove mountains but do not have love, I... am...nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body to be burned but do not have love, I... gain...nothing. Zip. Nada. Zero. Nothing.

It's not about whether our theology is correct or whether our doctrine is pure. When you get to the pearly gates, nobody's going to make you recite the Apostle's Creed or even the Lord's Prayer. It's not about professing the right kind of faith or never committing another sin. It's about whether the love of God burns so hot in your breast that it can't help but warm a cold-hearted world. Love is greater than hope. Love is even greater than faith, says Paul. How many times have you really heard that last verse of 1 Corinthians 13? Love is greater than faith. That's what it's all about, Alfie.

Christians claim Jesus is the revelation of God. God revealed, which means love revealed. And so to know what it means to love, we look at Jesus. Jesus did not spend his time on earth in a love-sick swoon. His love moved him to acts of compassion, to healings, to feeding the hungry, to providing wine, to raising the dead. His love sometimes moved him to forceful acts, running wild through the temple, swinging a whip and turning tables of the money changers, or speaking out harshly against the hypocrisy and injustice of the religious leaders. Sometimes God's love moved him to violate religious discipline, working on the Sabbath, refusing to stone an adulteress, talking publicly with women at wells, and portraying a heretic Samaritan as inheriting eternal life before the priest and the Levite. And, finally, his love showed us what every good love story has always told us, that love is willing to endure pain and even death for the sake of the beloved. In Jesus we see the fully-formed fruit of the Spirit in action and what love looks like when facing the joys and trials of human life.

They came to Jesus and they asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Love," said Jesus.

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and I meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" And the old man stood up, and he stretched his hands toward the heavens, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame." Amen.