

## ***Guided more by Spirit than by Law***

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Ok let's start off by doing a bit of a test. What are those Fruits of the Spirit that Paul listed? Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control.

Please do not hear this as the comprehensive catalogue of traits that define a good follower of Jesus.

Seeing these traits in another person might indicate that they are on the right track – at least of character, a good human – and perhaps the Spirit is working in them. Karoline Lewis muses aloud in her podcast this week that this is not just a list of traits, but if we pay attention to the original Greek, there is something more active, dynamic in how Paul puts this. There is a focus on being 'led' by the Spirit. How we are *led* in the world – making our daily decisions, how we move about and relate with one another.<sup>1</sup>

Paul in his thoughts for the Galatian church, seems to come down on the Law. This wasn't criminal justice "Law", it was Law as Torah, the Hebrew Bible teachings. Think of the Ten Commandments given to the Israelite people, the core of Jesus' living, healing and teaching. Love God above all other gods. Love your neighbour, as you are loved – we are created in Love, and we are to love our neighbours extravagantly but first we need to feel the love ourselves.

This was the Law; it was important grounding. But the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus' time, and of Paul's time after Jesus, they were, well, overly enthusiastic about enforcing God's Law. Paul was an extremist about Law, especially the dietary and cleanliness rules of Judaism. I'm guessing that he skipped the class for Jewish leaders on Love and compassion. But he had his moment of radical spiritual transition. His conversion was profound – understanding that Law the grounding, but that there is a dynamic called Spirit that helps us to evolve in our understanding of how to live out God's Love.

I had a significant transition in my life three decades ago. Starting University, I thought I had it all figured out. I was rigid in my ideas, about people – quite judgmental; I was simplistic in my understandings of people; and I was especially judgmental about those in the LGBTQ2+ community and women. Then, life happened; I had a crisis. I later called it an early mid-life crisis, at the ripe old age of 20. I was being confronted with new, more complex realities around me. My white, male, privileged perspective was being challenged at university by smart, articulate people who relentlessly chipped away at my stubborn resolve to hang onto what I thought to be the rules of life. Eventually, disoriented further by theological education while also supported as I re-imagined life and Call, I was made new; I heard fresh ways to follow Jesus, following in ways that required me to surrender my comfort, my privilege, my clinging to Laws and ignoring the nudge of Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon Brainwave on WorkingPreacher.org Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/850-3rd-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-13c-june-26-2022>

I'm still under construction. Have you had any similar transformative experiences? Being forced to let go of something that you cling to, something of Law, and perhaps the Spirit leading you in ways that nurture the Fruits of the Spirit in you?

I think we all yearn for simplicity. Things seem at times so complex – relationships, our roles in the world, being a person in this world; it used to be that we were boys, girls, women, and men. One or the other. Now we realize that there is a continuum for gender. Young people are undergoing transitions, new pronouns, daring to understand their gender and identity in ways that are more authentic.

What would Jesus think of the transformations, the transitions that young people and old alike are undergoing – taking great risks in order to live more authentically?

Authenticity.

Years ago, our culture was telling us who we are – man or a woman. One or the other. You are defined. That simplistic, privileged male I was at 20, it was constructed by my culture. I thank God that people have the courage today to say no to culture, to those around them sometimes, in order to be more authentic, more true to who they are inside. While the church might have claimed to have seen Fruits of the Spirit in us while holding us within rigid systems of gender and culture, I'm looking back and have a sense that our churches tended to exercise a simplistic approach – we followed Law and disregarded what Spirit might have been saying.

Those two passages that Betty read today, they are interesting when heard together. Paul's discussion about Fruits of the Spirit, traits seen in one who is led by the Spirit. And Jesus in Luke, his face trained on Jerusalem. That is code for is laser focus on the tough road he travels toward betrayal, crucifixion, and ultimately resurrection.

This story in Luke asks, and I paraphrase: *What does it mean to follow Jesus? Jesus says, "Follow me."* The response of followers, and again I paraphrase: *Sure Jesus, but first I have to...* I have to bury my family member.

That seems quite reasonable. If I had a dear family member who had a funeral coming up, I'd say the same thing. "But first I have to..."<sup>2</sup> Jesus throws out tough aphorisms. "Let the dead bury the dead." Luke's Jesus does this a lot. He wants people to follow him, it seems a simple ask but then there are these demands. Easy for you to say this, Jesus!

Being led by the Spirit, what might that look like? Do we at St. Andrew's seem to others to be led by the Spirit?

I am struggling this weekend, after the earth-shaking news dropped on Friday about the U.S. Supreme Court overturning the Roe vs. Wade ruling. Abortion officially left to individual states, which means that many of the most vulnerable women will be disempowered, and many children will be born into poverty. That is the other Law – criminal law. The law created by people – they are important, and help us to be good neighbours.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Let me be clear, any loss of life is evil. Abortion is not at all a good thing, but our United Church and many Denominations around the world point out that wherever poverty and lack of social supports prevail, as in so many American states and across our country in Canada too, sometimes abortion is a best choice for a woman.

I grieve that there are so many jubilant Christians saying that God's laws have finally been honoured in this decision. I wonder if God's law of Love has been honoured here. I lament these complex situations where there is no simple solution. People proclaiming loudly that they follow Jesus say that the simple solution is honouring God's Laws.

Where are the Fruits of the Spirit in all of this? The people who focus on the people, the most vulnerable who are impacted by these abstract decisions made by powerful people – the pastor in Alabama who sits with a teenaged girl whose family have disowned her. Love, kindness, patience indeed. The Spirit moves there.

As we, followers of Jesus, come to complex issues like abortion, homelessness, crime, perhaps issues in our own families that break our hearts, may we turn to the Spirit for guidance, that we might be led by that Spirit to show all those traits and more that show Christ in us: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control. Amen.