

## As Opportunities Emerge, What Fruit Will We Bear?

Friends in faith, the strong peace-making Love of God has brought us to this time and space for reflection. We locate ourselves on this twentieth of twenty-five Sundays in the long green growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year, on land that has lived in relationship with people groups for millennia before us. We also recognize and lament that the land and peoples with whom Jesus lived, moved and made meaning are currently being ravaged by the evil acts of human warfare. Let's enter into a time of wondering together: As opportunities emerge (like the sunlight through the apple tree on the cover of our worship bulletin), what fruit will we bear?

Let's begin with prayer: God of all-powerful Love, grant to each of us and to this community of faith serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends in faith – fellow disciples of Jesus, love is challenging work. Love in the form of peace-making is particularly challenging in a time of conflict be it an interpersonal or international. Conflict is often inevitable when one human oppresses another human or one human group oppresses another human group. Oppression is the abuse of resources in an effort to control the other. A desire or propensity to seek to control tends to come from deep-seeded fear, envy or lust. What resources do we sometimes abuse in an effort to control the other? Money, food and water, love, reputation or position, intelligence. We have each been complicit in oppression. I wonder: **what resources have each of us abused in an effort to control another? And I wonder: has another abused a resource in an effort to control you?** Oppression is strange, ugly, evil fruit. It poisons the body of God and diminishes our ability to shine forth the light of Christ – the light of all-powerful love and justice.

Our God (which is that all-powerful love and justice) created us to embody itself at every opportunity with which our lives present us. We know this in our spirits, our minds, and our bodies. Love and justice cooperating as they work their ways in and through us feels natural and truly grounding. We reflected with the Psalmist moments ago: *“Happy are those who act justly, who do what is right always!”* We experience happiness in varying amounts and frequencies in our lives. Mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and many other things act as barriers to happiness. But bearing healthy fruit of love and justice almost always increases our happiness – even if only in brief spurts.

But we forget that we were created to embody love and justice. We lamented with Psalmist moments ago: *“We have sinned the way our forebears did, gone astray and given into corruption...They (we) forgot you, their (our) Liberator, who had done such great things...”*

I wonder: **which of the evil powers I named earlier is most often complicit in your uglier fruits of oppressive, controlling behaviors toward others? Is it deep-seeded fear, envy or lust (by which I mean greed for more)?** What comfort we can find in the God whose love is always ready to hold and surround us (the one to whom we confess and from whom we receive reminders of peace) even when we are most lost or deeply hurting.

I have long been a fan of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It exudes encouragement based in deep love and hope. So, let’s hear again several pieces from that letter.

Paul wrote to his supporters: *“And I ask you, Syzygus, to be a true comrade and help these coworkers. These two women struggled at my side in defending the Good News...”*

A comrade by definition in the dictionary is a companion who participates in the work of another. This verse is about building solidarity and about building allyship. Solidarity occurs between people who share a common aspect of their identity and are together facing toward their oppressor. That's solidarity. Allies bind together across their very different social locations to pursue justice together. **With whom are you in solidarity, facing toward an oppressor? And with whom might you build an allyship as a bridge between your different social locations?** Comrades are needed in both solidarity and allyship.

We heard this: *"...present your needs to God through prayer and petition, giving thanks for all circumstances. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."* In coming time, I wonder: **will you practice inviting (welcoming) God's own peace to stand guard over your heart and mind, particularly when they are in trouble?**

Paul wrote, *"Finally, my sisters and brothers, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, decent, admirable, virtuous or worthy of praise. Live according to what you have learned and accepted, what you have heard me say and seen me do. Then will the God of peace be with you."*

I will speak further on the theme of integrity on our upcoming All Saint Sunday. In this moment, I invited each of us to wonder: **how can I live more truly in the way of Jesus?** Our prayer hymn in a moment invites us to be true as we seek to bear fruit of love and justice.

There is such a thing as compassion fatigue. We can become tired (even feel exhausted of our resources) when seeking to enact love and justice. But love is potentially the most renewable resource that we access.

Paul wrote, *"I know what it is to be brought low, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret: whether on a full stomach or an empty one, in poverty or plenty, I can do all things through the One who gives me strength."*

What could it feel like to experience God's overwhelming love and peace to such an extent that we feel we can do all things through the One who gives us strength? One of the most helpful articulations of the substance of faith that I've come across comes from Thomas Merton scholar and retreat leader James Finley: *"If we are absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things, then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love."*

Jesus taught and modeled an active faith, **so how do we put into action facing all things with courage and tenderness and touching the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love?**

When an opportunity to act for justice or love faces me directly, I lean toward these words that I share often from 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister, historian and author Edward Everett Hale: *"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do. What I can do, I should do. And what I should do, by the grace of God, I will do."* Words of loving wisdom from Edward Everett Hale.

One last moment with Paul in his writing to the Philippians: *"It gave me great joy in our God that your concern for me bore fruit once more. You had been concerned all along, of course, but lacked the opportunity to show it."*

I wonder (thinking back to our opening song): **who is thirsty or hungry for another new fruit of love and justice that perhaps God's Love needs you to bear?** I encourage you to be alert, watching for your next opportunity.

In closing, I invite us to wonder about these words from Leonard Cohen's poem "Anthem":

*"Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in."*

Friends, let's crack the world open and let the light of Love and justice shine through each and all of us – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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A United Church (Bayport, MN)  
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Philippians 4:1-20, Psalm 106:1-6,19-32,47-48

Shared during Words of Welcome (start of worship):

In 2007, singer songwriter Bryan Sirchio published a song entitled "Jesus Was Not an American."

*"And when the nations rage  
And the gears of warfare grind  
Jesus weeps for the victims on every side"*