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The Fruits of Our Souls

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Colossians 1:1-14; Deuteronomy 30:8-14

Summer is upon us and with it, long days, hot and humid afternoon, thunderstorm, and who can forget campfire.

During one of our men's annual fall retreats, one of our elders reminded me to attend the fire by making sure to set the logs close enough for the air and heat to pass through them, but not too close to choke the flow and too far to lose the thermal reaction. The thermal reactivity between the logs with the passing air ensure the fire is strong and burning.

Perhaps in the similar way, we need the thermal reactivity and proximity to share and generate greater heat while having enough space for the Holy Spirit to move through, around, above, and below us.

Our two past two Sundays' preachers have inspired us to live with the power and strength of hope. The letter to the Colossians is rooted in this hope that God is moving

among them and leading them to bear fruit among themselves, and in later chapters, to lead a “new life in Christ” with their neighbors. To express his deep admiration for their faith, Paul begins the letter with a thankful prayer. Even though Paul is imprisoned at a considerable distance away from this growing gentile community, prayer binds them together with gratitude, and mutual affection.

As we dive into these two passages this morning, I proposed a sermon title, “Fruit of our Souls.” Full disclosure, the title is not complete. The word fruit often conveys a certain completion or outcome. Yet the true trajectory of this morning’s sermon is about the journey and process of our ever growing and deepening faith in God. The fruit here is not about the end product but the making and manifestation of our faith on the way.

Setting aside the scholars’ debate on the authorship and the implied opponents, we will focus on the richness of the life in Christ. The letter to the Colossians offers to us markers on this journey of new life. With the living hope in us, we begin with Paul’s prayer, “we always thank God, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.” As we can see, Paul has deep affection and love for the Colossian community.

In our world, and especially in this paradoxical world of speedy and instant communication, yet still isolated and divided, our faith demands us to respond in love. Our world is changing so fast and as Kathy noted last week that all the major headlines trouble and grieve our hearts. Hope compels us to respond in love. Prayer as Paul has shown us is the expression of hope.

In *In the Way of the Heart: Desert Spiritual and Contemporary Ministry*, theologian Henri Nouwen points out the challenges to prayer with Christian when prayer is viewed as an intellectual exercise, an “activity of the mind” that reduces pray to simply speaking with God or thinking about God. Prayer is more than just thinking or pondering on God. Nouwen goes to say that while prayer has the intellectual dimension, but more importantly, it is an “activity of the heart.” The heart of the prayer, pardon the pun, is the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, moral and volitional energies. In fact, prayer, the act of praying and conversing with God changes us and draws us closer to God.

Our prayer ministry team prays for all members seeking for the spiritual assurance that God loves and will not abandon us. Through handwritten notes or cards, emails,

or phone calls, we receive prayer requests from our members, neighbors, and friends. They are received and passed along to our prayer ministry team. There the team members are committed and entrusted to lift up your petitions. Prior to the pandemic, we have a weekly prayer companion ministry that prays with you in person in the chapel. It doesn't matter if 10 people or no one shows up, they will enter the holy space and pray for all petitions that have been shared with us.

One of our longest running prayer groups is the Saturday morning prayer group that has met for decades. Through the years, they met faithful every Saturday. They shared the concerns of the church, the city, and the world. They also shared their lives. As time progresses and meeting in person became more challenging, the grand technology of telephone, yes, telephone, still webbed them together through prayer.

Roger Nishioka, pastor and professor writes, "Prayer not only draw these fledging communities closer to God; it is also what holds these fragile groups together."

If I may be so bold to ask, how is your prayer life? Pardon me, I mean no intrusion of your privacy nor performing a spiritual check up on you. Instead, my query is an invitation and encouragement for all of us to deepen our

practice of prayer as an expression of the fruit of our souls. This is active and persistent hope in action.

Now, the scripture tells us in Matthew, that prayer is not ostentatious, nor it is self-serving, and certainly not self-aggrandizing. Jesus in Matthew encourages us not to pray as the stage actors for public consumption, but to pray in interior space of our hearts with God. We don't need to pray on the 50-yard line after a football game or stand in center stage. It is a clear call for religious leaders, I am included, to be mindful and humble. Yet when we do pray publicly, we pray for everyone, and for concerns larger than our, such as, the uplifting of the whole human community and creation. Again Nishioka writes, "Prayer of the heart is the active presence of God's Spirit at work in one's life. In this mystery, it is the very nature of God that in some wonderful way we are redeemed, strengthen, and joined together with the whole church."

As we deepen our love for God through prayer, we seek to deepen and widen our knowledge of God and our fellow human community and creation.

Paul writes in vv. 9-10, "For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in

all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.”

This knowledge is not an esoteric wisdom, but a practical love for one’s neighbor. Knowledge and love are connected as Paul writes in chapter 3:14, “love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Knowledge and good work come together in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. In other words, knowledge that will serve others. Not out of arrogance and judgement, but genuine and humble service.

As we know, with the growing awareness of long existing racial and economic inequality, service begins when we are open for self-reflection of our own lives, assumptions, perceptions, and experiences. Gaining such knowledge of ourselves leads to deeper knowledge of God as John Calvin writes, “Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God.”

Again, if I may be bold to ask, how well do we know ourselves, our intentions, our assumptions, and our perceptions? Thank God that to know oneself is also to

know God. By seeking to know God, we can also come to know ourselves. Then in service of others, we come to know our neighbors.

Lastly, rooted in hope, connected through prayer, growing in the knowledge of God, we now participate with God in the creative and constructive future as God's incarnational presence.

Paul writes in v. 11-13, "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of God's beloved Son."

We have been made strong, prepared to endure everything, enabled to share in the inheritance, and rescued from darkness from pride, anger, privilege, and what has been inhibiting us for...not for us to congratulate ourselves or in our own circle or community. God has done all this so we can be the incarnation of God's love and justice in the world. We become partner with God.

When the Deacons made calls to our members during the pandemic, they were incarnational. When our Elders and Deacons took home communions to our homebound members, they were incarnational. When we greet our neighbors in need, we are incarnational.

Once again, if I may be so bold to ask, where has God calls and empowers you to be God's incarnational generosity, goodness, and faithfulness is for the sake of others, and not of our own agenda.

Catholic theologian Richard Rohr asks the question, "Who am I responsible for and how do I cooperate with the divine?" The response is a request to be centered relationally and stay in tuned to the greatest love. Then we may participate with God and others in working and serving for the purpose of fulfilling the vision of God for all of humanity and creation. What a joy, as Paul writes, to be in service of God for others.

Perhaps many of you have read the opinion piece on prayer by Annie Lamott in Friday's New York Times. Lamott, being her witty, irreverent, and self-deprecating way touched brilliantly and delightfully, if I may add, on several dimensions of prayer. She writes:

I do not understand much about string theory, but I do know we are vibrations, all the time. Between the tiny strings is space in which change can happen. The strings are infinitesimal; the space between nearly limitless. Prayer says to that space, I am tiny, helpless, needy, worried, but there's nothing I can do except send my love into that which is so much bigger than me.

In that space, Holy Spirit moves.

Lamott continues: I wake up praying. I say a prayer some sober people told me to pray 36 years ago, because when all else fails, follow instructions. It helps me to not fixate on who I am, but on whose. I am God's adorable, aging, self-centered, spaced-out beloved. One man in early sobriety told me that he had come into recovery as a hotshot but that other sober men helped him work his way up to servant. I pray to be a good servant because I've learned that this is the path of happiness. I pray for my family and all my sick friends that they have days of grace and healing, and I end my prayers, "Make me ever mindful of the needs of the poor."

Beloved in Christ, may we all vibrate to the frequency of the Holy Spirit. Let us live out the living hope in God through deepening our prayers, our knowledge of God,

self, and others, and serving all with humility and abiding love of God.

May the circle of God be unbroken.

May the love of Christ be persistent.

May the vibration of Holy Spirit be unending.

As we go forth with the presence of God.