

We often would like the fruit of the Spirit *to appear instantaneously* in our lives, making us, for example, more joy-filled or generous people. Instead, receiving the fruit of the Spirit requires us to become more like the farmers, patiently working the soil of our lives to make the conditions right for the fruits of joy and generosity to grow within us.

As a farmer waters the plants, we need to include times of spiritual refreshment like worship, Scripture reading and prayer in our lives. Farmers prune, weed and treat pests. Likewise, we need to remove from our lives anything that is counter-productive to our growth as disciples of Jesus Christ. Like a farmer works the soil, we, too, need to get our hands dirty by serving our neighbors and friends, living as citizens of God's reign in the world today.

As an uncultivated or untended apple or peach tree might occasionally produce some fruit, we, too, might receive some of the fruit of the Spirit without much effort. When cared for, though, those fruit trees can become far more productive, producing beautiful fruit more regularly. So, too, it is with us.

We become growers of spiritual fruit as we participate in making the conditions right to allow the fruit of the Spirit to grow within us. We must be diligent in *watering, weeding and working* in the orchard of our lives to make the conditions right for God to produce the fruit in us.

**The produce section.** So you go to the grocery store. Where are you going to find fruit and vegetables? In the "Produce" section. Isn't that interesting? That moniker serves as a great reminder that we do not manufacture fruit, but instead receive it. The role of the farmer is to participate in a natural process. By no means do farmers cause the fruit to grow. Instead, they make the conditions right to give the fruit the opportunity to grow. Then they get to collect what the earth produces.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. We cannot will ourselves to be, for example, more patient. There are no shortcuts, which can be quite frustrating. Maybe you have prayed the prayer, "God, please grant me patience, and give it to me NOW!" While we cannot force patience or any other fruit of the Spirit to grow in us, we can make the conditions right that allow them to mature in our lives.

In the movie *Evan Almighty*, God calls newly elected congressman Evan Baxter (played by Steve Carell) to build an ark in his suburban neighborhood. When Evan's wife Joan (Lauren Graham) becomes understandably confused and shaken by the odd behavior of her husband, she decides

to take some time away to sort it out. On her way out of town, she and their children stop at a restaurant where God (Morgan Freeman) serves as their waiter. His nametag reads "Al Mighty."

When the children are away from the table, the waiter/God engages Joan in conversation. He has noticed that she is troubled and asks if she is okay. She tells him about her husband and his ark, and asks for advice. What should she do with the challenge she has received of a husband who seems at least slightly crazy?

The waiter/God offers this beautiful thought. "If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience? Or does he give them the *opportunity* to be patient?" The waiter continues, "If someone asked for their family to be closer," which is Joan's prayer throughout the movie, "do you think God zaps them with warm, fuzzy feelings? Or does he give them opportunities to love each other?"

While we would like the fruit of the Spirit to suddenly and miraculously appear in our lives, it doesn't work that way. To borrow the phrasing of the movie, these fruits aren't zapped into our lives. Rather, *we are given the opportunity to allow them to grow within us*. When we participate in the process, cultivating spiritual fruit by planting, watering, pruning, weeding and waiting, we make room for God to do wonderful work within us.

**Jesus fruit.** But we are not called to produce just *any* fruit. We are to produce specific fruit. A Buddha-shaped pear is still a pear. Square slices of watermelon and heart-shaped slices of cucumbers taste the same as regularly shaped watermelon or cucumbers. Jesus fruit, on the other hand, is fundamentally different from other fruit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are not necessarily unique to Christianity.

You will recall that farmers create square watermelons and Buddha-shaped pears by using molds that shape and restrict the growth of the fruit. The fruit takes on the shape of the mold because it is not free to grow beyond it.

*Jesus fruit, on the other hand, is the product of freedom, not restriction.* Today's text is fundamentally about the freedom we have in Christ. Paul is so excited to talk about this freedom, that he awkwardly introduces the topic by telling us we have been set free for freedom. The repetition of the word *free* is used for emphasis. We are not just a little free. Instead, we are completely free, and deeply blessed with the gift of that freedom. Paul wants us to know that we are not simply being squeezed into a law- or rule-shaped mold. Instead, we have been set free to be fundamentally different.

**Free to be.** There is a common, cultural assumption that you and I are limited by circumstances beyond our control. A psychologist might tell us we are the products of our parents and limited by their emotional health. An economist might say we are products of our class, limited in our options by the wealth or poverty into which we were born. A sociologist might say we are products of our neighborhood or ethnicity, shaped and limited by cultural traditions and norms.

But the Bible tells us that we are free from those forms, free from those molds. Christ has set us free for freedom. We don't have to be the same shape as all the other watermelons on the vine or all the other pears on the tree. We aren't limited by circumstances beyond our control. There are no forms around us restricting us, forcing us into some unnatural shape. As the sons and daughters of God, redeemed and renewed by Jesus Christ, we have the freedom to be free, the freedom to be the creatures God originally created human beings to be. We have been set free to become Jesus-shaped, to live Jesus-shaped lives.

We participate in our freedom by becoming our own farmers, making the conditions right to allow God to produce the fruit of the Spirit in us. When God does, we get to live a life like no other, a life filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. A life of knowing who we are and whose we are. So take care to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, and grow to be more Jesus-shaped. Know that you are set free to break out of the mold and become the person Jesus means for you to be.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, how I praise and thank You that by grace through faith I am Your child; and I thank You that I am positioned in Christ, and placed in union with Him, Who is the true and living Vine. I thank You, heavenly Gardener, that You are graciously pruning me through the truth of Your word and shaping me into the person You would have me be. Cut away anything in my life that hinders my spiritual growth, and help me to learn the lessons that You would teach me, so that I may grow into the likeness of the Lord Jesus and bear much fruit to Your praise and glory. Amen

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## Jesus Fruit

Sunday, August 21, 2016

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Fruit comes in all shapes and sizes. Some fruit is spherical, like oranges, blueberries and grapes. Other fruit is oblong, like mangoes and papayas. Still others are apple- or banana-shaped like...apples and bananas. Some farmers, though, are challenging our assumptions about the shape of fruit. Go to the right market, and you may find square watermelons grown by botanical artists. At a restaurant, the cucumbers in your salad might appear heart-shaped rather than round, due to the produce shaping of another farmer. While amazing, forming produce into basic shapes like squares and hearts is just the beginning. One agricultural innovator developed a process where pears - having long been pear-shaped - can now arrive at your farmer's market in the shape of little Buddhas. The arms and facial features are so well-defined that the Buddha appears to be in a prayer-like, meditative state.

Fascinatingly, these fruits are grown this way; no knives are used to carve or create them. To grow square watermelons and Buddha-shaped pears, farmers use specially designed molds they attach to the fruit when it first appears. As the young fruit matures, it grows into the mold, taking on the shape of the mold, and when the fruit is ripe, the mold is removed. The fruit retains the shape of the mold, allowing the farmer to deliver a square watermelon, heart-shaped cucumber or Buddha-shaped pear to the market.

With or without the mold, producing fruit is no easy task, and our distance from the farm or orchard lessens our appreciation for just how difficult this process is. We simply go to the local grocery store and pick up whatever fruit we like, at a reasonable price. It's all right there before us and we can receive it instantly. Unfortunately, there's no market where we can acquire the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – so we need to become orchard keepers, cultivating these virtues within us.

**Our role in fruit production.** Ordinary pears, watermelons and all other fruit we consume require a great deal of time and labor. Seeds are planted. Trees are pruned. Weeds are removed. Plants are watered. Pests are treated. Farmers take great care to ensure that the plants have all they need to produce beautiful, delicious fruit. Then there's the waiting. Trees and plants take time to grow. Buds appear slowly, and fruit grows and matures over many days and nights. Successful growers need both hard work and patience to bring the fruit to market, whether pear- or Buddha-shaped.