

Galatians 5:22-23

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Wild Holy Spirit

A good list goes a long way. They give you a sense of order and control. They help you prepare for the day.

I am a big fan of lists.

In fact, I am such a fan of them that I have special highlighters I use to mark off completed tasks based on which category they fall under. Red is for Outreach ministry, blue for youth, yellow for chores, you get the idea.

Whether it's things to do for work or groceries to be bought, lists create structure, which feels especially necessary right now. So this Galatians passage is a dream for those of us who are list-minded.

There's no guessing, no hypothesizing, no interpreting.

Instead, we have a very straight forward list of the ways we are blessed by God. If we just do something to show that we are living into each of these fruits of the Spirit then we are good to go.

But I wonder...

I wonder what happens when we stop seeing this as a list to be checked off.

What happens when we take a step back and imagine something different, something more alive and unpredictable.

Lists are important And God gives us some lists to follow like the ten commandments, so fear not lists can also be a holy endeavor.

But Holy Spirit, well the Holy Spirit is anything but predictable.

In fact, in the Celtic Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is sometimes symbolized as a wild goose.

Instead of something delicate and seemly like a dove, it is pictured as this large, wild, unpredictable bird of flight. It is astonishing, sometimes even frightening, but always promises to show us unexpected ways of living in the world.

In a world that is so task-oriented, so list focused, receiving these fruits of the Spirit can reorient us to a different way of living.

When you apply for ordination, because yes in addition to all the meetings up at the Presbytery office and the check-in with committees, the multitude of tasks to be completed, you also have to fill out paperwork to apply to be ordained. So, when you apply for ordination you have to supply a list of references just like you would with any other job. It is highly recommended that you have a variety of people on your list, congregants, friends, co-workers, seminary professors, pastors, mentors, you want a list that can speak to your character through a wide variety of lenses.

And, as I was coming up with these references I realized that in some ways mine were incredibly diverse, but in another way, they weren't at all.

My first list, the list I came up with initially was completely full of women! Now, I'm not saying that men haven't had a vital role in my learning, faith development and call discernment. But when I thought about the people who knew me best, it was women who first came to mind.

And as I realized that I needed to diversify the gender on that list I couldn't figure out who to take off. Because, even though everyone there shared the same gender, they couldn't be more different in how they have shaped me and in how they know me.

Some of them are mothers through the act of giving birth, others through adoption. Some have never had children, while others are not in a place in their lives to even think about having kids.

And all of that 'motherly' potential is small in comparison to the gifts the Spirit has bestowed upon them. Gifts that have made it possible for all of them to be nurturers to those they encounter, regardless of whether they fit the traditional understanding of being a mother or not.

One woman I listed is outspoken and incredibly organized.

Another has a soft tone, but a firm command of who she is and how God is calling her to serve the world. She is kind, but she is not a pushover.

A third is an eloquent sermonizer, able to marry her wild imagination with grounded theology.

One is thoughtful, she sent cookies and notes during exam periods at seminary, making sure to check in because she ‘had a feeling’ that I might need some extra support.

And on that reference form, you’re not even allowed to list family members: the women who have known me my whole life for better or worse and are stuck loving me anyway.

The reality is that all of those descriptions don’t even begin to cover the depth of each person, and the ways they live into God’s call to share God’s grace with others. Sure, I could assign each of them a fruit or two from the Galatians passage, but that is just the surface of how God has shaped them, and in turn who they’ve shaped me.

The other limitation to lists is the implication that each thing has to be completed before it can be ‘finished’. Lists bring to mind tasks that can be fulfilled. When I see these gifts from God, I don’t think God intends for us to wake up in the morning, and if we do something kind check it off our list.

Today I let someone change lanes in front of me because they were stuck in traffic. There’s my kind deed, now I can do whatever I want. Or, I was patient with my very angsty teenager this morning which means I’m free to be as short-tempered as I want until my alarm goes off tomorrow morning.

God doesn't call us to see these gifts in a vacuum.

They're not sterile, and neatly lined up on a page.

Instead, God asks us to imagine how these gifts are manifesting in the people around us.

So a list may be a good place to start, but what happens when we imagine these fruits being unleashed on the world. Instead of constraining them for comfort's sake, we seek to know these gifts in others and give them room to breathe.

These fruits of the Holy Spirit invite us all into a deeper relationship with God by seeing how God works in those around us.

It feels only appropriate that on Mother's Day, we take a moment to consider the ways in which God has called the women in our lives to care for us, others, and even themselves. The gift the Holy Spirit gives us today, and every day, is to see and name those fruits.

Think about the women who have shaped you, who have cared for you and nurtured you.

Maybe they showed you how to hold your ground on something that really matters, or how to find joy in small things.

Maybe they taught you how to fish, or play the piano.

Perhaps you learned how to parallel park because of them.

I imagine there's a woman in each of our lives who showed us, at some point, how to have a conversation with God.

I know that all of us have been cared for by women who love us and surprise us.

Sometimes they are our mothers, sometimes they have been mentors or teachers, friends, maybe even daughters or sisters or coworkers.

All of them women who are just as delighted and surprised as we are in those moments when the Holy Spirit grabs hold and takes flight. God blesses them, and us, with gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

God doesn't do that to check off something on a list. God does that because God loves us, and the best way to experience that love is through relationships with others.

Today, and all days, I am thankful for the relationships that I have with all people, but especially those women who live out those fruits of the Spirit by being exactly who God has called them to be:

blessed children of God.

For that, I will be eternally grateful to God.

Amen.