



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

FUSION: BLENDING FAITH & LIFE

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New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
September 7th, 2008*

It was great last week to have Scott give a concert. Wasn't that fun? I always love getting the chance to hear him sing. I've got to say, it was also nice to have a Sunday off on a week where I was in town all week. I was able to spend time planning for fall, thinking about this new series and where we're headed as a church. I also got to clean my office, which was a major event.

A.A. Milne, the author of Winne the Pooh, once said that the best thing about being disorganized is that you're always making exciting discoveries. And it's true. In my cleaning this week, I came across one of my all time favorite comic strips that I had cut out years ago. I think I've shared it here before. It's probably been sitting on my desk since the last time I mentioned it...Anyway, it's from a strip called Pickles, and it starts out with this elderly lady, Grandma Pickles, standing with a watering can. Her granddaughter, Gina, comes up to her, watches her for a minute and says, "Whatcha doin, Grandma?"

Mrs. Pickles smiles and says, "Why I'm watering my plants, Gina." Gina takes in that information, watches her for a few more minutes, then says, "But Grandma – you don't have any water in that watering can." Mrs. Pickles just keeps smiling and says, "That's all right dear. These plants aren't real anyway."

Why do I like that so much? I think it's because deep down I'm afraid of Mrs. Pickles. I'm afraid of turning into her. I don't want to go through life with an empty watering can, doing meaningless activities as if they matter.

As I've been thinking about this fall, what keeps coming back to me is the idea of having faith that actually makes a difference in our lives. If it has no meaning, I don't want to waste time on it. It's great to go through the motions of church, but if it really has no effect on how I live, what's the point? I was just talking with someone this week who was pointing out how little difference there seems to be between Christians' lives and non-Christians' lives.

My firm belief is that Christ's watering can is full of cool, refreshing, vital water, and that our lives need to drink deeply from it. We live in a world that is parched and dry, where

everything feels artificial. I think most people are thirsty for something real, something that makes a difference, something that has true strength and substance to it.

But it's hard sometimes to see how Jesus fits with the rest of my world. We've pointed out before that we can't really expect society at large to be very supportive and helpful in figuring out where faith fits. The Barna Group just came out with a new study showing how little influence faith has over how many Americans make their moral decisions.

And I'm not much help to myself. I find that years can go by and I still struggle with the same things I always have. There are still these pockets in my heart where it feels like I'm just playing at being a Christian – going through the motions but not seeing any genuine results.

Think of a cookie dough blizzard. I know I do. Sometimes when you go to Dairy Queen, you get someone who is kind of new at using the blizzard machine. You know they're new because they give you this brief look of panic when you order one, because it's their least favorite thing to make.

But then you get your blizzard, and it looks great on top, so you start eating it, but you find that the chunks of cookie dough only goes about a third of the way down and the rest is just vanilla ice cream. They didn't blend it right, so you don't get the good stuff all the way through.

That's what I'm trying to get at with this idea of fusion. How do we blend our faith all the way through our lives? How do we get the good stuff in every corner so that we are thoroughly Christian? When two things are fused together, there's no more separating them. They are united. But how do we get that connection between Sunday morning and a Thursday afternoon?

To help us find this fusion, we're going to spend the fall looking at what is called the fruit of the Spirit. Paul gave us that term when he wrote his letter to the Galatians. He was giving them a list of qualities that characterize the Christian life.

Different translations communicate different passages of the Bible with varying degrees of clarity and impact. I just love the way The Message version translates Paul's words on the fruit of the Spirit. It is so fresh and direct that it sticks with you.

Galatians 5:16-23, 25

My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

I love how Paul sets this up: What we're talking about here is a free life – getting to a place where we are not controlled by our compulsions, getting to a place where the choices we make reflect how deeply we've been changed by God. This is not going to be a series that gives you a heavy list of things you have to do. Hopefully instead it unlocks the door and lets you out of the cage of your own self interest so you can be who you were made to be.

Paul goes on and spells out in black and white what it looks like to have your life be about your compulsions:

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: sexual immorality; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

Yuck. What a mess. And yet almost anybody can find themselves somewhere in that list. We are all weighed down by sin and its hold on us in its various forms. We can talk all we want about Christian virtues, but this is the reality people are living with. It's a struggle to fuse faith and life when sin is in the picture.

And let's be honest: We aren't going to have space for God's Spirit to act in our hearts if we're not ready to let go of those things. There is definitely a choice involved. We are not going to see our faith fuse with our life if we're making excuses and making room for sin. We will be pulled in opposite directions.

And God's direction is so much better. Paul gives the contrast:

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard — things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely...

Doesn't that sound like a big relief? After the horrible list Paul just ran through, this is a little slice of heaven. And this is the fruit that we're talking about – qualities that make our lives distinctly Christian. Paul wraps up his thought with what I've been trying to say so far this morning when he says this:

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.

That's fusion. Our Christianity isn't just a concept or a feeling – it's intended to be something much more integrated and personal.

It's been nearly 9 years since the golfer Payne Stewart died in a plane crash. He had just won the U.S. Open and was at the peak of his game. He was also at the peak of his faith. For much of his career in public, Payne was known for having a short temper, dark moods and a generally immature way of handling himself.

Then, he rediscovered his faith. He had been raised as a Christian, but his beliefs weren't really a force in his life. The all consuming drive for success and achievement was what mattered to him. But then his kids got fired up for God, and he re-evaluated his own life. He got into the Bible, and the Bible started getting into him. It didn't just change his behavior – it changed him. Larry Guest, a reporter for the Orlando Sentinel, said it was like he did a 180 and became the kind of celebrity you wanted to hug and not just applaud. At his funeral one of his friends said, "During this past year, everyone who knew Payne Stewart saw a dramatic change in his life." After he won the U.S. Open, Payne himself commented, "my faith in God is so much stronger, and I'm so much more at peace with myself than I've ever been in my life."

He still had struggles. But he handled them differently. Once he snapped at a reporter who asked him a question after he had just blown a shot. But a while later, he called him in the press room and apologized. The reporter was floored, because no pro ever does that. It was just one example of the many ways Payne was letting God's Spirit shine through him.

One of the few things that survived the plane crash was his WWJD bracelet that he had started wearing everywhere. He had decided that faith was no longer going to just be a belief in his mind, he was going to let it shape his character. And it did.

That's just one person's story, but that's what we mean. God wants that for each one of us – to find a new peace in ourselves. To have the kind of freedom and joy that we haven't known before. To have us be whole and holy.

So in the coming weeks, we're going to break down this message from Paul. We will dive into each one of the characteristics he describes and look more in depth at what it means. But first, there are some basic foundational truths we need to consider when we're talking about fruit of the Spirit. The first one is this:

Fruit comes from a tree.

Stuart Briscoe tells the story about a friend of his who as a boy had a large fruit tree growing right outside his house. It was an important tree to him, because he used it as his escape route from his room window when he was in trouble.

One day his dad announced that he was going to cut down the tree, because it had never produced any fruit. So the boy and his friends went out and got some apples and hung them in the tree, hoping to fool his father and persuading him to leave it up.

The next morning the dad looked out the window and yelled to his wife, “Come quick! It’s a miracle! There are apples all over the tree! And what’s even more amazing is that it’s a pear tree!”

You can’t fake fruit. You can’t make it in a factory. You can’t come up with it in a laboratory. The only source for it is a healthy, living tree. The fruit is a byproduct of the life that is already there

I think that’s an extremely important distinction to make when we transfer the concept to matters of faith. Because the fruit of the Spirit has to come from the Holy Spirit. There’s no other source. We’re not talking about good behavior to develop on our own. We’re talking about a byproduct of the life of the Holy Spirit.

Now you start talking about the Holy Spirit and some people get uncomfortable. It’s fine to read stories about Jesus in the Bible, or to think about God as a Father up in heaven, but a Spirit sounds like a ghost creeping around.

But he’s not creepy at all. He’s God on earth here and now. Think of the U.S. having an embassy in Moscow. Even though it is built in a foreign country, the land is considered U.S. soil. The Russian government has no authority there, because even though it is thousands of miles from the U.S., it still belongs to America.

The Holy Spirit in our hearts is God planted in a foreign country. He is God’s very own presence placed there to claim us for him, to give us God’s strength to do God’s work. He is what makes all the difference between us just agreeing with the idea of God and actually having a relationship with him.

So the first and foremost question to ask yourself is, “Do I have the Holy Spirit in my life?” Without him, I’m just going to end up wearing myself out to create something I can’t. Do I have the Holy Spirit?

If you’re not sure, you can be. That was the whole point of Christ’s death and resurrection. God looked at humanity, with all our compulsions and sins and knew we could never overcome them on our own. And all that brokenness and imperfection stood in the way of us having any kind of relationship with him, because he’s perfect. And God knew that if we couldn’t make it to him, he’d have to come to us. So he sent Jesus.

Jesus lived a perfect life that was totally free of the compulsions and addictions we suffer from, but he experienced the consequences of them. He died the death of a sinner, becoming a substitute for us, taking all the punishment we deserved on himself. And then he obliterated death, rising to life on the far side of the cross.

When we look to that death and say, “Jesus I need that. I need what you did. I can’t overcome my sins on my own and I’m sorry for them. I can’t break these habits. I can’t break these chains. I need all your goodness. Come into my life and take charge,” – when we do that, Jesus places his Spirit in our hearts. That’s the point at which we can know we have the very presence of God working inside of us.

The Bible says the Spirit is like the deposit that guarantees what’s still to come. It’s a sure thing. There’s no need to guess whether or not he’s there – if we’ve invited Christ in, he says he’s there to stay.

Getting back to fruit then: Our job is not to go out and make fruit. I remember as a kid in Sunday school class, when we would talk about the fruit of the Spirit, teachers would say things like, “Why don’t you pick one fruit like patience or kindness and work on that this week, then pick another one for the next week, etc.?”

Let’s think about the logic of that for a minute. If I’ve got an apple tree and I want apples, I don’t say, “I’m going to concentrate really hard on apples this week. I’m going to visualize them. I can imagine biting into a crisp, juicy red delicious.” That’s nice and all, but it’s not going to get me any apples. My focus should really be on taking care of the tree.

If we want to see more fruit of the Spirit, our attention is best spent thinking about our relationship with him, rather than trying to think positive thoughts about the different fruit. We’ve got to cultivate that relationship.

Jesus told his disciples:

John 15:4

No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

The branch is not going to produce any fruit if it’s been chopped off the tree. No life is flowing through it. We can’t expect to see fruit in our lives if we’ve cut ourselves off from the Holy Spirit. When we neglect our relationship with God, we wither. When we let various sins and bad attitudes take up our mental real estate, it chokes off the life of Christ that would normally flow through us. When fear and anxiety and stress drop on top of us and we are stuck, they squeeze all the joy and peace away from our relationship with God. When we pull away from God’s people, the people who are home for the Holy Spirit, we can’t be surprised to see less fruit in our lives. Fruit is so tied into relationship.

As we travel through life together as a church, in just the past five years, many people have gone through some very deep waters. Big ugly problems with no easy solutions. People have generally responded in one of two ways. Some people have withdrawn into themselves, becoming more and more isolated, almost chopping themselves off from the tree. That’s a natural response to pain and hurt. We’ve all done that at times in self defense. But in general, when that’s the response, it tends to compound the struggle with

bitterness, anger, resentment and depression on top of the other problems that started it all.

But just as often, I've watched people go the other way and respond by digging themselves deeper into the tree, clinging to their relationship with Christ, looking to him for hope and answers. And those people have blossomed in the face of hurt. The problems haven't miraculously gone away, but I'm telling you the peace and gentleness and kindness that has grown in them has been miraculous to the point of being stunning. And it has been remarkable to see how consistently that pattern repeats itself. You can almost predict it. That's God at work. That feeds my faith. Story after story of people who have received hope when they thought theirs was at an end. Can I get a witness to that? If you have seen somebody in the past year – yourself or someone else – grow deeply in their faith through a crisis, raise your hand.

Fruit is a byproduct of the life of a tree. If you want more joy, if you want more love, more peace, more patience, more kindness, more self control, it's not going to come through will power. It's not going to come through working harder. It can only come by cultivating that relationship with Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit.

It only comes from trees. Secondly,

Fruit takes time to grow

I came across a blog this week that was written by somebody who has walked away from their faith. They said they took the step to become a Christian, but then nothing happened. They didn't feel any different, and they were led to believe that if they didn't feel it, it hadn't happened. Sadly, several people who had responded to the blogger affirmed that idea: You know Christ is at work in you by some instant feeling of change.

That doesn't really fit the concept of fruit growing, and I don't think it's what the Bible teaches. I love the story of Frog & Toad, when Toad sees Frog's beautiful garden and wants one of his own. Frog told him, "It is very nice, but it was hard work."

So Frog gives Toad some seeds and says, "Plant them in the ground, and soon you will have a garden." "How soon?" asked Toad. "Quite soon," said Frog.

Toad ran home. He planted the flower seeds. "Now seeds," said Toad, "start growing." Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow. Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted "NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!" Frog came running up the path. "What is all this noise?"

Toad tells him, "My seeds will not grow." And Frog replies, "You are shouting too much...Leave them alone. Let the sun shine on them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow." And sure enough, several days later, little green plants appeared. "At last," shouted Toad, "my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow! But you were right, Frog. It was very hard work."

The hard work of fruit is in waiting for it, letting God shine on us for a while. Letting the Spirit rain down on us. We are works in progress, but we have in our heads this idea that the process of maturing is somehow wrong. We want to see more immediate results. We become discouraged at just how daily the Christian experience really is and at how slowly we seem to change. We feel guilty at how long it takes to change.

But the only place where the Bible says we will be changed in an instant is when Jesus comes back. Until then, if we're looking for overnight maturity and completeness in our faith, we're asking something of ourselves that God isn't asking. I find it comforting that God isn't shocked that it takes time for us to grow up.

It's what Eugene Peterson calls "A long obedience in the same direction." Fruit takes time to ripen in our lives. Fortunately, God is a God of the long haul and he doesn't give up on us in the process.

Philippians 1:6

There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.

Fruit comes from trees, fruit takes time, and

Fruit fills you up

Fruit isn't just pretty to look at on the tree – it was always intended to be used for food. Way back in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve,

Genesis 1:29

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

I tend to think of the fruit of the Spirit as being like our wedding cake. Karin and I had an enormous wedding cake. Since her dad was the pastor of a big church and she was his only daughter, EVERYBODY came to the wedding. So we picked out this flavor that we thought would be really great. We got the little tiny taste of it for the picture. And then we stood in a reception line for two hours. By the time we were done, the cake was nothing but a memory.

That was food for the benefit of other people. And sometimes, it feels like the reason God gave us the fruit of the Spirit was for the benefit of other people. I'll be more loving. I'll be more gentle and kind and considerate. Those all sound like good qualities that are mostly helpful in the way we relate to other people. We will look and sound like better Christians to the outside world.

But God gave us these gifts of fruit to feed our own souls. They are not primarily about outside behavior – they are about inside character. And they have the potential to help us grow stronger and healthier than we ever imagined.

Our discussion of fruit would be incomplete if we didn't at least mention that

Fruit is the future

If you were writing a definition of fruit from a more scientific perspective, you would describe fruit as the house for the seeds of the plant. It contains all the nutrients needed for seeds to grow into baby plants. Because an apple tree's job is not just to produce a nice crop of apples – it is to produce the next apple tree.

There is potential future life in the fruit of the Spirit. The way we live out our faith, the way we demonstrate the life of the Holy Spirit inside us has the possibility of transferring to new life in someone else.

Colossians 1:6

All over the world the gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

Dave Wittenberg and I were talking the other day about a Christian comic book we had read as kids called the Gospel Blimp. It starts out when George and Ethel decide they want to share Christ with their neighbors. They get talking to some friends about it and as they're talking, the Good Year blimp goes by. So somebody gets the bright idea that a blimp with messages on the side of it would be a really effective way to advertise Jesus.

It gets worse and worse. The blimp dumps little paper tracts all over the city, which only serves to make everyone mad. It's having the opposite effect of what was intended. Meanwhile, one of George and Ethel's neighbors gets sick, so George and Ethel just jump in and start taking care of them. And what do you know? That is what impacts the neighbors. They see the life and love of Jesus in George and Ethel's lives, and they want that for themselves.

There is life in the fruit. There is power in the fruit. People were drawn to the person of Jesus, and there is something compelling and irresistible when someone's character consistently reflects Christ. That's what gets me fired up about this series. Because as we see more and more of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, all kinds of good things happen.

In his new book, Culture Making, Andy Crouch talks about the role of Christians in the world. He says we ought to be "people who dare to think and do something that has never been thought or done before, something that makes the world more welcoming and thrilling and beautiful."

I can't think of anything that would make the world more welcoming and thrilling and beautiful than a group of people whose lives are brimming over with the fruit of the Spirit.

If there's one thing you take away from this morning, I hope it is the idea that the fruit is not something you have to add to your "to do" list. It's a gift from God to fill you up and turn you into a force to be reckoned with. Paul wrote to the Ephesians and said,

Ephesians 3:16-17

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

That's the goal – that we will be strengthened in our inner being, that we will be people filled more and more with Christ's presence, that his message of hope will be validated and confirmed by the fruit that people see in our lives.

As we come to communion this morning, and you think about what Christ did on the cross to give us his Spirit, I'd encourage you to just reflect on the following.

First, do I have the Holy Spirit in my life? As I said before, although it's a mystery how God does that, it's no mystery how we invite it to happen. One speaker said it's as simple as saying I'm sorry, Please and Thank you. I'm sorry for my sins. Please come into my life and take charge. Thank you for dying for me. There's nothing Jesus likes more than answering that prayer.

If you've already taken that step, then ask yourself, am I cultivating my relationship with God? Am I tending the tree? What might be getting in the way of growth? Have I let some bad choices squeeze the life and joy out of my connection to Christ? Am I really feeding into the relationship by spending time talking to him, reading his word, living it out?

No doubt when you examine your heart, you're going to see failures. None of us is doing everything we can to cultivate that healthy relationship as much as we can. Which brings us right back to the cross. As you see your mistakes and your own inability to get it right, take it to Jesus right now. Say, I'm sorry, Lord. I'm not where I need to be. Forgive me. Help me change. Fill me up with your Spirit."

There's no time like communion for reconnecting with Christ. He died to make that connection possible. Let him restore your life once again. Lamentations 3 says his compassion never fails. His mercy is new every morning. He has the grace you need today.