

Sandra Brown
Fruit-full: JOY
Colossians 1:3-14; Galatians 5:22-23
May 12, 2019

Last week we started a new series on the fruit of the Spirit. The main points we covered last week are first, that God created the world, and God created US, to be fruitful. Second, the fruit of the Spirit is not a list of qualities we are supposed to be working on, but something that the Spirit works to produce within us. Third, it's not a case of some of us producing some of the fruits, and some of us producing others. As children of God, created in God's image, we all have all of them—we're just all in different stages and seasons of development.

Last week we briefly looked at LOVE. I shared with you my story of accepting my own challenge that I threw down back in February one Sunday—I invited you to pick someone in your life that wronged you, someone you don't like or who doesn't like you, and pray for that person twice a day for a week. When I did this myself, with someone who'd been upset with me and showed it, I found that before long, my own hard feelings towards the person I prayed for dissolved and evaporated, and I grew to feel love and appreciation for this person, much to my surprise, because I wasn't trying to love them, just pray for them. And I continue to do this with people to the extent that it is changing my life.

Let me stress that the WAY I've been praying is important. It's been a very hands-off, open-ended kind of prayer—"God bless this person," not, "God please help this person to see what they're doing, and realize they are wrong, and just please, God, work in their hearts to help them be more compassionate"—no specifics, no attempt to control, just "God bless them." I believe that this very simple, "leave it on God's hands" kind of prayer was the opening the Spirit needed to help bring forth the love that was already growing inside of me.

Apples are a fruit that beautifully represents love, because just as there are many kinds of apples, so there are many varieties of love. There's also that wonderful phrase, "The apple of my eye," referring to someone who is precious and beloved.

Today, we look at JOY. Joy is an orange, because of the sweetness and juice and vibrant color of oranges. Oranges are exceptionally good for you, and so is JOY.

What images come to mind when you think of JOY? Maybe the feeling of waking up on the first day of vacation, and the sun is coming up from behind the mountains, or the lake, or wherever you are, and the birds are outdoing themselves with their singing, and you're free to just be in that moment and appreciate being alive. . . maybe the high you get from running further or faster than you ever have before, or losing yourself in the music as you play an instrument . . . Maybe a baby resting his head on your shoulder in utter contentment . . . or the exuberant tail wagging of your dog when you get home or a soldier stepping off the airplane and into the arms of her waiting family . . .

David Brooks had a column in *The New York Times* this week called, "The Difference between Happiness and Joy," where he described giving the commencement speech at Arizona State University last Monday. He said:

There are two kinds of emotion present at any graduation ceremony. For the graduating students there is happiness. They've achieved something. They've worked hard and are moving closer to their goals.

There is a different emotion up in the stands among the families and friends. That emotion is joy. They are not thinking about themselves. Their delight is seeing the glow on the graduate's face, the laughter in her voice, the progress of his journey, the blooming of a whole person.

Happiness usually involves a victory for the self. Joy tends to involve the transcendence of self.

Scripture is SOAKED in joy. And as David Brooks observes, joy does indeed involve the transcendence of self. It's most often connected with awareness of God, and what God has done for God's people. In the Psalms, the whole creation is called on to sing and shout for joy. In the Gospel of Matthew, the wise men are overwhelmed with joy when they see that the star they've been following on their search for the messiah has stopped. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents--a whole celebration going on for one person! [There's that wonderful passage from Hebrews, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross. And my personal favorite from Nehemiah: ". . . the joy of the Lord is your strength."

In today's scripture reading from Colossians, the author has never met the people to whom he is writing. But he's heard about them. And he says, we have not stopped praying for you. And what they've been praying for is that the people would be filled with the knowledge of God and grow in the knowledge of God, because this is what leads to a fruitful life.

There's a special link between knowledge of God and joy. We're talking about knowledge OF God, not knowledge ABOUT God. You can know a lot about somebody, but until you've spent time with them, you don't really KNOW them. (In seminary I met a number of people who knew a lot about God but didn't seem to know God). Knowing God has to do with paying attention. Awareness of God's presence, and God's Spirit moving within you, and in the world around you.

I thoroughly enjoyed Marie Kondo's book, The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up . She has a little show on Netflix now, called "Tidying Up with Marie Kondo." I was struck by the story of how she arrived at her tidying method, which she now uses to help clients all over the

world. After spending three years tidying and discarding things in her home, her space still felt cluttered and she was nearly in despair. One day she heard a voice inside her head saying, “Look more closely at what is there.” She finally realized that by focusing only on throwing things away, she was setting herself up to be unhappy. We should be choosing what we want to keep, not what we want to get rid of. She said, “I had been so focused on what to discard . . . that I had forgotten to cherish the things that I loved” (41). The way to choose what to keep and what to throw away is to “take each item in one’s hand and ask: ‘Does this spark joy?’ If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it.

Kondo says that the trick is to handle each item. You cannot just look at your closet and decide that everything in it gives you a thrill. You have to take each item in your hand and touch it and pay attention to how your body reacts.

What I appreciate about her approach is first of all, the reverence and respect with which she treats material items without idolizing them—because color and touch are gifts of God, after all, and when you really appreciate your things you don’t need as many of them—and second, the way she understands the importance of stopping and paying attention when it comes to experiencing joy.

The Spirit produces the fruit of joy when we direct our attention to God, and cherish what God has given us. In the midst of a society where school shootings are now happening more frequently than we can track them, and last week’s report from the United Nations which said that more than one million species of plants and animals are at risk of extinction due to the way humans are treating the planet, we remember that underneath the anger, the violence, and the destruction, God is still Lord of all. God still has the last word. The first smile and giggle of a

new baby are still priceless. The sounds I hear from my bedroom window, of owls and coyotes and frogs and birds, are still thrilling.

I love those words from one of my favorite hymns, “For the Beauty of the Earth.” “For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth over and around us lies . . .” Singing has a special power to direct our attention to God. There’s a connection between music and joy, and it’s hard to know what comes first: is it that we feel joy, and express it through song, or is it that we sing praise to God, and this helps us feel joy? All I know that in any given church, the most consistently joyful people are almost always members of the choir.

And I remember a day years ago, when my circumstances were as bad as they had ever been, when my marriage was about to be over yet my children were small, and I had no job, and my closest family lived 1600 miles away, and I cried more that year than I probably cried before or since, but one day on a walk I found that I could still notice the beautiful day, and I started singing praise to God without quite knowing why, and I called my mom and told her about it, and she said, “Oh, Sanny, that’s the Holy Spirit.” Joy does not depend on things going right, but on paying attention to the gifts of God even when things aren’t going right.

When is the last time you experienced joy? Whatever is going on in your life right now, look more closely at what is there. Take a bite of joy, and savor it. Feel it making you strong. The joy of the Lord is our strength, and there’s plenty to go around. Amen.