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FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

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... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
Galatians 5:22-23

As an English major, I know about singular and plural. "Fruit" and "is" are singular. This list of nine characteristics of a Christian life are plural. So what are we to make of this? In this passage from Galatians, Paul exhorts us to bear fruit. Which one? All of them! As a reflection of God's abundance, we are created to bear all of these virtues to God's world and to plant the seeds of these traits in future generations.

This is a recurrent theme in Scripture. From Genesis 1:11, in which "trees bear fruit with the seed in it," to Revelation 22:2, in which the "tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nation," the Triune God plants and tends and harvests the fruit trees in God's orchard. The fruit is God's food for God's people. The seed in the fruit is to assure the perpetuation of this fruit for the next generation ... and the next ... and the next.

Considering the nine characteristics of a life of following Jesus named by Paul in Galatians, how have you experienced them in others? Who has

planted the seeds deep in the soil of your life? Let's explore how we have tasted this fruit. Here are some of my mental snapshots:

LOVE poured into me from my beloved parents - words of tender love, caring touch, confidence that I could do anything I put my mind to accomplish, and their presence with me through all of life. Through them, I learned of God's agape love, that is unconditional, unearned, undeserved, and unmerited.

JOY bursts from my daughter and son-in-law's car every Sunday evening, as five-year old Gwynnie arrives for dinner, calling, "Papa! Nana!" Sheer, exuberant joy! Every fiber of her body is filled with celebration, as she dances, twirls, and sings her way into our home and our hearts, scattering delight in her wake.

PEACE flows from my middle daughter, Kathryn, as she teaches my yoga class, framed in faith, practicing breath that fills all of us with Christ's profound peace. Each practice brings peace to mind, body, and spirit, so it is only fitting that we close each time together with Namaste, the Sanskrit word that announces that the holy in me honors the holy in you.

PATIENCE was not an attribute of Alison, my first born, as a young child. It has become her hallmark as an adult. A clinical psychologist, she works with truly challenged and challenging adults with mental illness, chemical dependency, and eating disorders. Her clients believe in future possibilities, because Alison believes in them and journeys with them.

KINDNESS is our son, Jon's, way of being in the world. Always willing to help a neighbor, even and especially the ones who have not been particularly kind or willing or connected. He is a creative problem solver, with a huge heart to make the lives of others better, whether or not they are grateful or ever choose to reciprocate.

GENEROSITY is how my beloved husband Les navigates life. As a practicing physician, he was generous with his time and expertise in teaching his residents the things that made them superb physicians. As a retired physician, he has become an always willing and available "house doctor," ready to help family, friends, and neighbors with any project.

FAITHFULNESS is my friend Joyce's way of walking with me, as church colleague and beloved friend. From her, I have learned and experienced God's surprising invitation to ask hard questions, to explore faith boldly, to use the gifts of God I did not know I possessed, until she named them and journeyed with me on paths as yet untrodden.

GENTLENESS was my Gramma Carlson's approach to life. Widowed young, she came to visit my parents for two weeks when they were expecting me ... and she stayed for 25 years! A woman of deep faith and very little formal education, she made God's story come alive to my brother and me, as she connected us every single day to God's love, God's word, God's care, God's gentleness.

SELF-CONTROL was Mike Efron's loving, patient smile for each of the boys in the MIT Upward Bound he headed fifty years ago. The boys, who lived in the housing projects behind MIT, pushed every one of his buttons. Mike persisted in loving these boys, even and especially when their behavior was less than lovable. Exercising great self-control, Mike taught me to affirm the best God had created in each person, until they became their best person!

Now, it is time to get out your personal memory album of those who have been your role models, your teachers, your encouragers. Who were they? Be ready to name them and thank God for the gift they have been in your life. If they are still alive, call them or drop them a note, telling them the difference that they have made in your life.

Then, build the next volume of those for whom you hope and pray and strive to plant the seeds of those attributes, water them well, and watch them bear fruit for God's world. Consider to whom God is sending you to plant these seeds. Imagine for a moment the children, youth, and adults of all ages that you already love. Wrap each one in prayer. Walk your neighborhood, looking for those who might need a kind word, a gentle smile. When you wince at the day's news about lives untouched by these qualities, pray for God to pour out these gifts on them. And look for opportunities God provides for you to touch the lives of others with the fruit of the Spirit!

Remember, in baptism, the pastor addressed you by name, "child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." You. Yes, you! Now, bearing the imprint of Jesus, go out and share God's abundance with the world, so in need of this spiritual food.

* This was first published as an article in *Gather*, the magazine of Women of the ELCA.

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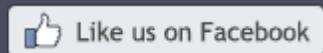
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