

“Making a List”
Galatians 5:22-25
15th Sunday after Pentecost

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I received a newsletter article recently.
It was written by a colleague.
The subject of the article was making a list.

Have you noticed all the lists that are floating around these days?

Top Ten Comfort Foods in Quarantine
Fifteen overlooked movies of the 1980's
Essential TV shows to Binge Today
Which Gabriel Garcia Marquez novels to skip, which to read

Of course, we also have the more pandemic-centric lists:
The 8 best facemasks to buy
Ten important tips for staying safe when traveling
Five essentials for home schooling your child this fall

And then there are the more painful lists:
Covid-19 deaths by state
Covid-19 deaths by ethnicity
Unemployment statistics by generation
Poverty rates by region

And so, my colleague asked, what list is your church making?¹
What lists are you following day in and day out?
And what are you devoting your energy to...what is making its
way to the top of your list?

¹ From a recent newsletter by the Rev. Mark Ramsey at Macedonian Ministries.

As you think about what lists are important to you right now, let me invite you to consider one more.

It's from the Apostle Paul:

“...the fruit of the Spirit,” writes Paul,
 “is love, joy, peace, patience,
 kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
 gentleness, and self-control.”

Has there ever been a time in my life or your life when we've needed Paul's list MORE than we do right now?

A little background on these verses might be helpful here. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he was NOT in a good mood. He was frustrated, he was angry...

Paul had founded these churches in Galatia.

And now he's heard that his beloved Galatian congregations are doing things that are, in Paul's mind, antithetical to the gospel.

“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel...”

Paul's MAD! Paul believes that the Galatians have decided to live by THE WRONG LIST.

Under pressure from another group of Christians, a group that disagreed with Paul about what Christianity ought to look like in those

early days, the Galatians now seem to be going with THAT group's version of the gospel instead of PAUL'S version of the gospel.

And Paul has no control over which way those Galatian congregations are going to go...

You don't have to have founded a church to feel this way. Have you felt like you had no control anytime over the past 6 months?

Consider one situation in your life right now over which you wish you HAD control, and you know, deep down, you DO NOT have control.

Maybe it's not just one situation that comes to your mind. Maybe, if I gave you 30 seconds, you'd have a whole new list on your hands.

So what Paul does in this letter is remarkable to me. Paul gets mad, yes. He makes the best argument he can for HIS theology, his way of practicing the Christian faith...

But he does not let his LACK OF CONTROL override his commitment to practicing the love of Christ.

How does he begin this letter?

Not with angry words, but by offering grace:

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...”

And how does Paul end this letter?

Not with a real ZINGER, but by offering grace:

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters.”

And when he makes that list of the fruits of the Spirit, I’m not convinced that Paul is just talking to the Galatians. I also wonder if perhaps there’s a part of Paul that’s writing to himself.

Reminding himself that there are priorities more IMPORTANT than having control over the future, or than how he feels at any given moment...

“...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

And so, when Paul calls the Galatians to live by THAT higher standard, he’s also calling himself to live by the same standard.

This is why I think Paul’s words are more important than ever right now.

You and I are living in what feels like a storm of REACTIVITY these days. With a once-in-a-hundred year pandemic overturning life as we know it, and an election year that puts so many emotions on edge—it’s easy to let feelings rule the day.

And yet, it seems that what Paul is doing in this letter is preaching a kind of love in which how we feel on any given day does not become TOP PRIORITY.

Let me get at it this way.

In his book, *Washington's Crossing*,
the historian David Hackett Fischer describes
how George Washington personally set the American policy
toward captured enemies – “persons under control”
in the parlance of military operations.

Fischer writes:

After the battles in New York,
thousands of American prisoners of war were treated
with extreme cruelty by British captors.

Some Americans escaped, and their reports had the same impact
as those American prisoners of the Japanese in World War II.

But American policy of prisoners emerged after the battle of
Trenton.

George Washington ordered that Hessian captives
would be treated as human beings
with the same rights of humanity for which
Americans were striving.

The Hessians were amazed to be treated with decency, and even
kindness...

The same policy was extended to British prisoners after the battle
of Princeton. Washington ordered one of his most trusted officers to
look after them:

‘You are to take charge of 211 privates of the British army...
...and treat them with humanity

and let them have no reason to complain
of our copying the brutal example
of the British army in their treatment
of our unfortunate brethren.”

Fischer concludes:

“Congress and the Continental army generally adopted this
“policy of humanity.”

Their moral choices in the War of Independence
enlarged the meaning of the American Revolution.”²

Do you know anyone who holds their life to that higher standard?

Long before Washington crossed the Delaware, the Apostle Paul
asked the Galatians to consider that same kind of higher standard.

A standard of...

“...love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
gentleness, and self-control.”

Not just toward some people.
Not just for the people we like,
or the people we find easiest to get along with.

But as Paul puts it a few verses later:

“So then, whenever we have an opportunity,

² David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, as cited in “My Enemy, Myself,” a sermon by the Rev. Fleming Rutledge, in Rutledge’s book *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2007.

let us work for the good of all...”

Over 30 years ago, an article appeared in *The New York Times*.

The writer was A.M. Rosenthal, he wrote about a former colleague and a friend.

The friend’s name is Nicholas Gage.

Nicholas Gage is originally from Greece. He came to this country when he was just a boy. He came over with his sisters, but without his parents. His dad was already here in the States. His mother, Eleni, did not travel from Greece with her children.

Eleni sent her children to America, to their father, because Greece was in a civil war in the late 1940’s. The communists wanted to claim her children, take them away from her, but Eleni wouldn’t let them. She managed to get Nicolas and three of his sisters out of the country...

But Eleni herself was captured, tortured, and taken to be executed.

Nicolas, of course, did not know this at the time.

But he learned of his mother’s death
when he was still in a refugee camp overseas,
and then when he came to America, he learned more...

So Nicolas Gage set out to find those people responsible for ending his mother’s life.

As Rosenthal writes:

“Nicholas grew to manhood in America. He spent years tracking the man who ordered [his mother’s] death, [because he wanted] to kill him.”

He ended up finding this man.

“But when he confronted the murderer he did not take out his gun.”

He walked away. Why?

“Nicholas knew killing the murderer...would not be love as Eleni knew love for [her] children.”

He remembered his mother's last words [before she died]
'my children,' [she cried]...

[It was]...a cry of love that bound him.”³

Bound him to the kind of love he would exemplify for his own children.

Friends, in the midst of whatever it is that you cannot control in your life right now, there is a love that binds you, binds me, binds us all as children of God.

God’s act of love in the cross of Jesus Christ holds us to a higher standard, a list that is different than the lists that our world tries to tie us to:

³ “On My Mind; The Murder of Eleni,” by A.M. Rosenthal, in *The New York Times*, December 15, 1987. I first read about this story in *Eleni*, by Nicholas Gage, New York: Ballantine Books, 1983.

Do you know anyone who has lived by this standard that Paul sets forth?

Not just on good days.

Not just on days when the sun is shining and life feels like it's in the palm of your hand.

But every day. In every circumstance.

Someone who has made a decision

to live according to a higher law,

or a higher love—

and that decision has affected YOUR life?

I hope you noticed that in your Harbinger mailed out to you this week, there's an insert. An insert with the fruits of the Spirit listed at the top of both sides.

Let me invite you to do something with that insert this week.

I want you to make a couple lists.

On one side, make a list of the people who have approached you in recent weeks, or even throughout your life...with love,

with joy,

with peace,

with patience,

with kindness,

with generosity,

with faithfulness,

with gentleness,

with self-control.

Make a list of those people.

And give thanks to God for them.

And on the other side of that paper, list all people you can think of in your life whom you could share the fruits of the Spirit with this week, this month, this school year.

How many fruits are there?

There are nine.

So see if you can put nine names, one for each fruit, and share that fruit with those people in the coming weeks.

You see, you never know—when the fruits of the Spirit are shared—you just never know what the Spirit will do with them, and how far the Spirit might take them...

Four hundred years ago, Martin Rinkart could have come up with a powerful list of reasons to be angry and to give in to despair.

Rinkart was the pastor of the small German town of Eilenberg in 1618 just as the slaughter and chaos of the Thirty Years War was beginning.

This was a period so catastrophic that the population of Germany
fell from 16 million to 6 million
over the course of those thirty years.

Eilenberg was a walled city, a crowded city,
a city vulnerable to famine and disease.

In the year 1637 there was a terrible plague.

Four of the other pastors had died in that town, and Martin Rinkart was the only clergy remaining in Eilenberg.

He conducted 4000 funerals that year, sometimes handling over 40 funerals a day.

As the tide of slaughter, famine and plague began to recede in the 1640s, Martin Rinkart, who had lost half his household,
 including his wife, and could have been forgiven
 for feeling resentful,
 bitter and unforgiving—

Rinkart sat down and wrote one of the most famous hymns in the German language, what we know in English today as “Now Thank We All our God.”

Viewing the wreckage of war,
 and the folly of his fellow human beings,
 and a pestilence that no one could control,
 he wrote a hymn of joy, of love, of thanksgiving, of peace.

A hymn that you and I still sing today.⁴

What STANDARD do you think Martin Rinkart was living his life by during that terrible and tragic time?

What list was governing his life?

It is, according to Paul,
 the same list that governs every Christian life.

Including yours and mine.

Amen.

⁴ The story of Martin Rinkart can be found on various sites on the Internet.