

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
on March 17, 2019**

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Here's a sampling of recent obituaries, either the heading or the opening sentence. "Jerry Merryman helped design the first hand-held calculator in the mid-1960s." "Barbara Low was among a core of female scientists whose research in the 1940s unleashed a bonanza of lifesaving antibiotics." "Kevin Roche, an architect, put green spaces on roofs, concealed parking, and preserved landscapes." "Miles Maiden invented a pocket-size device to purify water with ultraviolet light." "Andre Previn was among the 20th century's most redoubtable musicians and certainly one of its most versatile." If you're ever a little overwhelmed by the craziness in this world, take a look at the obituaries. These life synopses are a reminder of the wonder in this world: scientific advances, artistic talent. But, what occurs to me is that how we structure an obituary is a telling reminder of how we prioritize our lives.

We go to school to get an education. We try out different activities. We learn about different fields. We figure out our own skills and interests. We get jobs and pursue careers. The breadth of society is awesome: scientists, engineers, builders, plumbers, electricians, artists, musicians, writers, librarians, teachers, farmers, grocers, retailers, policemen, firemen, mayors, governors, athletes, entertainers, doctors, lawyers, managers, executives – the list goes on and on. It is awesome. The array of talent sustains and enriches our lives together in this world. We understand the importance of caring for one another. But, when you stop and think about it, isn't it ever so easy to lose sight of Scriptural priorities. We get wrapped up in our jobs and activities. Even when we desire to live in service to others, we forget the "why" of what we are doing and we get caught up in the "how." When things are working out as planned, pride, and envy, and

fear get in the way. We get competitive. We might become critical, or controlling, or manipulative, or even divisive. It happens to all of us. We jump to conclusions. We assume the worst in one another.

But, what if we assumed the best? What if we put ourselves in the other person's shoes and tried to understand what was shaping their perspective or their behavior? What if we let our faith inform every transaction, every interaction? Scripture does not focus on us getting an education, finding a job, pursuing a career. Scripture tells us that the core of our identity is as God's beloved. If we hold on to the knowledge that we are human, that pride, envy and fear are integral to our nature, and even so, God loves us...if we hold onto that knowledge, then we love because we are loved – loving one another becomes our priority. The crux of our story, the heart of our life is not the jobs that we hold or the activities that we engage, but the matters of the heart, the fruits of the Spirit: love, patience, kindness, and faithfulness.

In his book *Life on the Vine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), theologian Philip Kenneson explains why the fruits of the Spirit are the essence of life. He writes, "God has called out a people who through their very life together would bear witness to God's character and reconciling mission in the world. That character and mission have been uniquely embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, and it continues to be reflected, even if imperfectly, in the life of that community animated by his Spirit. The fruit that the Spirit desires to produce in our corporate and individual lives, therefore, is not merely a hodgepodge of admirable character traits or virtues that are universally admirable or commendable. Rather, God desires to produce this fruit through the Spirit—and the community of Jesus Christ desires to have this fruit produced in its life—because these dispositions reflect the very character and mission of God" (p. 32). The matters of the heart are life itself.

Kenneson explores the fruits of the Spirit. How do we cultivate love in the midst of market-style exchanges. We live in a society that encourages us to operate as self-interested parties. During this season of Lent, we can reflect on whether our relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and God are inward-focused or outward-focused. How do we cultivate patience in the midst of productivity? Our society exalts productivity. Time has become one of our most precious resources. During this season of Lent, we can reflect on our lives as just a chapter in a story that spans many, many generations, and so we recognize that time is a gift. How do we cultivate kindness in the midst of self-sufficiency? We are taught self-reliance and independence from a young age. During this season of Lent, we can reflect on our utter dependence on God, who creates and redeems and inspires. We can reflect on the truth that we are whole only through one another. How do we cultivate faithfulness in the midst of impermanence? We live amidst rapid change which encourages lack of commitment – we like to keep our options open - and encourages disposability – think fast food containers, obsolete cell phones, readily antiquated laptops. During the season of Lent, we can reflect on God’s abiding presence in our lives, God’s eternal covenant. We can reflect on the peacefulness of lasting, authentic, loving relationships.

I read one more obituary recently, this one for Donna Monteen Smith. If you read far enough into the synopses of her life, past her favorite activities, you learn this: “Her life was a living example of her favorite Bible verse, Ephesians 4:32 – ‘And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.’” What if being kind, compassionate and forgiving was the header of her obituary? What if the priority of our lives, the motivation, the beacon, the cornerstone, is living in Christ’s love? In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is pushing to get his work done. He is headed to Jerusalem. He knows his time is

near. Life is short. We have work to do. Let us prioritize Christ's love. Amen.