

## Blueberries: A Fruit of the Spirit

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We are in the final day of a very fruity weekend. It actually began at 6:30 last Wednesday night with the dress rehearsal of our first blueberry musical since 2019. On Thursday, we began seeing visible evidence that something exciting was about to happen—tents being erected, blueberry desserts being baked, porta potties being strategically placed around town. Early Friday morning, our church lawn blossomed with rows of vendors of various sorts—crafts, T-shirts, food, and so on.

And the driving, compelling reason for it all, right up to this morning, has been that ubiquitous tiny piece of fruit, the modest wild blueberry. Not planted and cultivated in gardens, but growing wild on the barrens. Not picked like apples or strawberries, but raked with a strange metallic device. Not shipped here in refrigerated trucks from Mexico or California or Brazil, but native to Washington County. Truly a fruit among fruits, the wild blueberry.

On the off chance—the *very* off chance—that the blueberry might appear in the Bible, I went digging around to find out. Sadly, but not surprisingly, our little wild blueberry is not a Biblical fruit. To be honest, I didn't really expect to find *any* fruit in the Bible, but I was wrong. To my surprise, the Old Testament mentions six types of fruit, some of which appear dozens of times, and these fruits have been cultivated in the Middle East for thousands of years. In their own ways, they're just as special and healthful as the wild blueberry.

1. The first recorded mention of figs dates back 4,500 years. First Kings 4:25 says, “During Solomon’s lifetime, Judah and Israel lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree.”
2. Ancient Egyptians made wine from dates, which have immense health benefits. In the Bible, the date palm tree often symbolizes peace, victory, and fertility.
3. Olives belong to a group of fruit called stone fruits, which also includes things such as mangoes, cherries, and peaches. Olives, olive oil, olive trees, and olive branches are mentioned many times in the Bible.
4. The most frequently mentioned fruit in the Bible is grapes, which were cultivated several thousand years ago. The oldest winery was in Armenia around 4000 BC.
5. Pomegranates, a symbol of prosperity and ambition for ancient Egyptians, were used for treating various infections.
6. And, of course, apples are first mentioned in the Book of Genesis, but they also show up in Proverbs, where we read, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold.”

The book of Joshua includes three towns named after fruits:

- *Anab*, which means grape,
- *Rimmon*, which means pomegranate,
- and *Tappuah*, which means apple.

And in Genesis we find a woman named *Tamar*, which means date.

Fruits are sometimes the subject of laws in the Old Testament:

- Numbers 6:3 says that a Nazirite may not eat or drink grape products.
- Deuteronomy 24:20 stipulates that you may beat an olive tree only once, and then the remaining olives are for the poor people—an ancient gleaning practice.

Fruits occasionally appear in curses and blessings:

- Deuteronomy 28:40 says, “Your olives shall drop off [the tree].”
- Hosea 9:10 says, “I find Israel [as pleasing] as grapes in the wilderness.” Or as we’d say today, “I find Maine as pleasing as blueberries on the barrens.”

And of course fruit occasionally appears as objects in stories. For example, when Moses’s spies are checking out the Valley of Eshkol, before the Jewish people crossed into the Promised Land, one thing they do is check out the grapes, pomegranates, and figs growing there (Numbers 13:23).

But that’s all in the Old Testament, so what about the New Testament? Well, in the New Testament, the word *fruit* appears over sixty times, though most of the references to fruit are figurative or metaphorical, like when Jesus talks to his followers about the “fruits of your labor.”

One of the most frequently cited New Testament mentions of fruit—though still not blueberries, alas—is in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where he writes about the fruits of the Spirit. Hear these words from Galatians 5:13–17 and 22–23.

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don’t let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don’t get eaten up by each other!

I say be guided by the Spirit and you won’t carry out your selfish desires. A person’s selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one’s selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn’t do whatever you want to do.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this.

You might remember earlier this summer when we learned about the *gifts* of the Spirit, and how each of us is given a gift from the Holy Spirit to be used as we serve as God’s hands and feet here on earth. We looked at 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, where the Apostle Paul writes about the gifts of the Holy Spirit—what they are, where they come from, and how they’re to be used:

God’s various gifts are handed out everywhere, but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various ministries are carried out everywhere, but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various expressions of power are in action everywhere, but God himself is behind it all.

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is. Everyone gets in on it, and everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people!

The variety is wonderful: wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues. All these gifts have a common origin, but they are handed out, one by one, by the one Spirit of God.

Okay, but what's the difference between the *fruits* of the Spirit and the *gifts* of the Spirit? Well, the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit are what results from us using our spiritual gifts. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we bear *fruit* in the form of moral action—and that fruit takes the form of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now, to be honest, it's easy to reel off these nine words, but what do they really mean to us as Christians—how we choose to live our lives, and our relationship to God? Let's look at these fruits of the Spirit a bit closer.

1. Love refers to our love of God and our neighbors, without any thought of receiving something in return. It's not the same as the warm and fuzzy feeling we might have for our best friend or our cat. Instead, it means love as expressed in concrete action toward God and our fellow humans.
2. Joy is an exuberance for life. Joy isn't emotional in the sense that we commonly think of it. Instead, it's the state of being undisturbed by the negative things in life.
3. Peace is the serenity or tranquility in our soul that comes from relying on God. Rather than getting caught up in anxiety for the future, Christians, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit—the *paraclete* or companion—trust God to provide for them.
4. Patience is a willingness to stick with things. It's the ability to bear the imperfections of other people, recognizing our own imperfections and need for God's mercy and love.
5. Kindness is a sense of compassion in the heart, a willingness to give to others above and beyond anything that we might owe them.
6. Goodness is rooted in a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. It's the avoidance of evil and the embrace of what's right, even at the expense of our reputation and fortune.
7. Faithfulness, as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, means being loyally committed to living our life in accordance with God's will at all times.
8. Gentleness is not needing to force our way in life. To be gentle is to be forgiving and gracious rather than angry. A gentle person is meek—like Jesus himself—and doesn't insist on having their own way, but instead yields to others for the sake of God's kingdom.
9. Self control doesn't mean denying ourselves what we need or even necessarily what we want, as long as what we want is something good. Instead, it's the exercise of moderation in all things.

So back to our tiny blueberry. I suggest to you this morning that there just might be a connection between Maine's wild blueberries and the fruits of the Spirit.

- When I have a bowl of cereal for breakfast, if I add a handful of blueberries, I actually find it easier to love God and my neighbors without expecting to receive anything in return. It's true. Try it.
- A slice of blueberry pie, particularly if eaten with vanilla ice cream, brings me joy and makes me more exuberant about life.
- How about you? Might a blueberry smoothie for breakfast make it easier for you to be patient and bear the imperfections of other people as you go about your day? I think so.
- Would a double scoop of blueberry ice cream in a waffle cone cause you to experience a rush of kindness and compassion? Think about it.
- Imagine yourself, at this very moment, sitting down to a slice of blueberry cheesecake. As you take that first mouthful, don't you have an overwhelming feeling of goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness. Absolutely.

But when we get to self-control, the ninth fruit of the Spirit, we hit a snag. Honestly, there's just not much about Maine's wild blueberries that compels us to exercise moderation. After all, who wants to stop at one scoop of blueberry ice cream? Not me.

Yes, blueberries are healthful, beautiful, and incredibly delicious. And they can cause us to experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness. But self control? Maybe not so much.

Nevertheless, this tiny fruit is truly a gift from God that enriches our lives in many ways. And every year, on the third weekend in August, the fruits of the Spirit are obvious all around us at Centre Street Church and among the hundreds of visitors to the Machias Wild Blueberry Festival. May we carry this love and joy, this exuberance for life, in our hearts and souls over the coming weeks and months. And may we always be grateful for the many gifts, including wild blueberries, that God gives us so freely.