

Tending the Wild Garden



*Growing in the Fruit
of the Spirit*

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*To my amazing colleagues and first readers
Kim Vanbrimmer and Char Mace and
the unbeatable team at Westminster John Knox Press*

*But 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.*

Galatians 5:22–23 (CEB)

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INTRODUCTION



*Before every person there marches an angel
proclaiming, “Behold, the image of God!”*

—Jewish Proverb

As children, we are sometimes asked what we are going to be when we grow up. We usually answer with what we are going to do: a role we want to play, like doctor, firefighter, teacher, writer, chemist, mom, or dad. As adults, when we meet new people, someone invariably asks us what we do, and we rattle off a job title or make jokes about retirement. What if, instead, we spent a bit more of our time thinking about the being inside of our doing? It is easy in the crush of responsibility and activity to lose sight of the part of us that is deepest and most true, the part that is in constant communion with the Spirit. This book is designed to help you become more aware of the “being” part of you in relationship with the Holy Spirit that lives within you.

Linger a while on the apostle Paul’s provocative image of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23a), we can discover anew what it means to *be* a Spirit-indwelt, deeply loved child in whom God makes God’s home.

Everything I write about in this book is already inside you. It is not something that you have to search for high and low. The Spirit and its fruit are already working away, feeding and flourishing, whether you are aware of that work or not. The fruit is within you, whether you cooperate with it or not. The fruit of the Spirit is what God *does* in us, because that is who God *is* in us.

Notice that the fruit of the Spirit is referred to in the singular. It is “fruit” and not “fruits.” All the aspects that Paul mentions are part of one whole. When we explore the fruit of the Spirit, we pay attention to that which is most deeply planted within our souls. It is not, at heart, an action plan for us to master. It is not even a set of beliefs to which we acquiesce. It is a loving awakening to the ways that Spirit works in us and what that healing and ripening work produces.

To engage with the fruit of the Spirit is not just to understand or to better recognize that fruit, as useful as that may be. It is, rather, to deepen our relationship with our source, the wild untamed Spirit of God, who brings to maturity a way of life that is both countercultural and immediately recognizable as home. To awaken to Spirit fruit is not to become other than we are in order to fix ourselves, our lives, or our problems. It is to truly *be* ourselves. It is to be the grace-blessed, Spirit-inhabited, divinely loved and strengthened beings that we were created to be.

When we recognize ourselves as dwelling places of the divine Spirit, we realize that we do not acquire the fruit of the Spirit like a trophy at a soccer match. Our task is to tend the Spirit’s garden, ripen in the Spirit’s ways, taste the fruit, get to know its richness, and create an environment for the Spirit to express herself in us and through us. The more aware we become of the Spirit’s presence and fruit, the better we are able to live out of their beauty.

THINGS TO REMEMBER AS YOU STUDY

A couple of things may be helpful for you as you enter into these reflections. First of all, I invite you to use a different lens from the one through which you may most often look at instructions in the Bible. We often see the Bible as urging moral characteristics and choices that we must embrace and allow to guide our behavior. There are many cases in which that is perfectly true. For this exploration, however, I invite you to set aside the heavy need to master the fruit in your behavior. Set aside as well all the attendant judgment, shame, and desire for control. Try on a new set of glasses that contain the dual lenses of *awakening* and *surrendering*. Try to entertain the notion that the fruit is not a set of morals to be checked off in order to feel safe from God's wrath or displeasure. Nor is it a checklist to manage in order to be a faithful disciple. Rather, acknowledge, for a moment, that the Spirit is already bringing to fruit every possible good thing in, and through, you. You are asked simply to clear the ground, expand your vision, release, and share what the Spirit produces in and through you.

To explore the fruit of the Spirit in this way, it will be helpful to reframe your image of God from police officer to midwife. If the Spirit's job is to keep you in line, that is one thing. If the Spirit's job is to bring new life to delivery within you, that is another thing altogether. Both roles can certainly be useful at times. For now, consider that God is not an offended monarch on a faraway throne who is perpetually disgusted with us hapless mortals. Rather, consider that God calls us to the joy of God's presence by inviting us to discover our deepest desires, our most authentic selves, and God's own immense power and beauty. Let God do the work of bringing forth fruit in you with carrots and not sticks.

A second thing that will be helpful in this study is to develop comfort with paradoxes. They are at the heart of the spiritual life. The Bible is full of them, most notably that the route to true and everlasting life is through physical death and the many little deaths along the way. In approaching the fruit of the Spirit, we discover that trying to master them never works. In my opinion, no one ever embodies the fruit of the Spirit by trying harder. At the same time, we have some responsibility for the inner work of garden tending. We cannot work our way to surrender, yet we must work hard to create an environment for surrender. Both of those things are true at the same time even though they may not seem to be.

It will be helpful as you read not to worry about or rate your progress. Those are not categories of thought in the Spirit's garden. Growth and ripening are the categories here, and they often happen in fits and starts. Fret not! You are not a failure. You are on a journey, and a lifelong one at that. The fruit, in each of its aspects, is not intended to be an intermittent outpouring but a settled state of our being. As with any ripening, that takes time. Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you." Still, as with all blooming things, there are seasons of abundance and seasons of waiting for new growth. Our job when we are overflowing, and when we seem fallow, is to tend and to wait.

A third thing that may take some getting used to is the limitation of the English language for talking about the Spirit. What pronouns are appropriate for talk of the Spirit? In the Hebrew Scriptures, also called the Old Testament, the Spirit (Hebrew *ruach*) is feminine. In the New Testament, the pronouns applied to the Spirit (Greek *pneuma*) are neuter. While the Scriptures in English most often use masculine pronouns for the Godhead, and masculine pronouns are always appropriate when speaking of Jesus' life on earth, the pronouns lose their meaning when

Jesus ascends in fullness to the Godhead. In that broad, undefinable, unitive state, gendered language can only limit and confuse. All metaphors for the divine break down when pushed too far. God is not gendered but is reflected back to us in all human beings, made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).

Still, to use the pronouns “she” and “it” for the Spirit, as the Bible does, in our day can light people’s hair on fire and send them into the streets screaming heresy. Or, more often, they cause a reader to grind her teeth, mutter something about being politically correct, as if that were a bad thing, and check out of the book altogether. Due to these challenges of language, I avoid pronouns for the Spirit as much as possible. When that becomes so awkward that the point I’m trying to make gets lost in the construction, I use “It” or “She” in accordance with the Scripture. Let these pronouns roll around in your heart and soul. Taste them. They are not heretical. They are not political. They are biblical, and you may find that they have healing work to do in you as well.

THE CONTEXT

I have always had a come-here, go-away, come-here, go-away relationship with the apostle Paul, the author of the letter we consider in this book. His lavish insistence on the power of grace and the capacity for personal and communal transformation draw me like a hummingbird to nectar. His culture-bound misogyny and his blinders to his own blinders (like our own) make me want to run screaming for the soft comfort of more symbolic and mystical texts. Still, even in my go-away moments, I find that if I stay and cut slits in my own blinders, I can see a mystical explosion of divine presence at work in his words. In the few verses that this book explores, I find just such an explosion.

Most of Paul's letters are correspondence with people he knows and churches he has founded. Such was the case with Galatians. In 25 BCE, the Romans created an imperial province called Galatia. It included the original kingdom of Galatia and extended southward to include portions of six other regions, including the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Much of the region was in what we now know as Turkey and parts of Greece. Perhaps this letter is addressed to one particular congregation in that area. More likely, it is addressed to a group of churches that are all struggling with similar issues.

What issue led to this letter? We don't exactly know, but it is clear that Paul was furious with them! First of all, some were claiming that Paul could not have been an apostle because he did not meet the criteria set out by Peter when Jesus' followers decided to replace Judas (Acts 1:15–26). Paul spends the early part of his letter defending and defining his apostleship.

What was of most concern to him, however, was theological and not personal. Apparently, some of the Jewish Christians believed that Christ was sent for the Jewish people only. They had been raised to despise Gentiles, so much so that they believed the call to care for the neighbor referred only to their Jewish neighbors. In some quarters the hatred was so intense that Gentiles were thought to have been created just to fuel the fires of hell. These more strident views were difficult to tame completely even in Paul's early mission. While Paul welcomed Gentiles, some in the Galatian church feared that if Gentiles were allowed to be Christians it would somehow negate God's covenant with the people of Israel. That was a bridge too far.

And yet, Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ. What were they to do? Their answer was to insist that the Gentile converts first become Jews and that the males be circumcised. They thought they were being both generous

and righteous. Paul, on the other hand, saw this as a first step back into the full requirements of the law.

The issue for him was justification (how people are saved). The Jewish Christians said that Christ (grace) and circumcision (law-keeping) gave one right standing before God. Paul maintained that Christ alone does that. The bulk of the letter makes the argument that we are free in Christ from the requirements of the law. In the verses that will guide our reflection, Galatians 5:16–23, Paul gives his beautiful description of Spirit-filled life. He paints a picture of life without Christ as center and what the fruit of the Spirit brings about in a Christ-centered believer and in the beloved community. He is very much concerned about the judgmental and fractious spirit that has grown up in the church. People are taking sides and talking badly about each other. He will have no more of it! The Christian life is to be marked by certain qualities, and nothing more or less than that will do.

ABOUT THE SPIRIT'S GARDEN

When I was a little girl, I often had a hard time breathing. I remember it being especially difficult in the spring when the thick pine pollen coated the front porch of our home, the cars in the drive, and the lungs in the house. Sometimes, when the air was thick and the infections in my lungs persistent, as I lay in bed struggling to breathe, my mother would lie across the foot of my bed and tell me stories of Seagrove Beach, Florida.

Seagrove was, in those days, a tiny, barely developed spot on the Gulf coast where the waters were emerald green and warm, and the sands sugar white. It always seemed that I breathed a little easier there. Maybe the ocean breezes swept the pollen far inland and away. I'm not sure. What I do remember is that when I was desperately

sick, Mama lay at the foot of my bed and reminded me of Seagrove. She described it in elaborate detail, the water, the sand, the shells, the beach bonfires with hot dogs on a palmetto frond that Daddy sharpened to a fine point. She promised that if I would hold on, we would go there. I remember closing my eyes and breathing deeply, as deeply as I could, and imaging myself running along the shore in the sunshine with my eyes closed and arms outstretched. It was my vision of wholeness.

The fruit of the Spirit is Paul's vision of wholeness. In Christ, we live in and share a garden, an orchard, a vineyard of beauty, bounty, and love that produces fruit to feed and change the world. Paul's language of the fruit of the Spirit describes the outward manifestations of an interior life lived in communion with the Spirit. Like the mysterious transformation of a seed into a fruitful plant, the product of this Spirit-filled life will be obvious to all and feed both our souls and the Spirit-starved world around us.

For many of us, the Spirit's garden is elusive, far more elusive than a beach trip for a sick child—and just as alluring. We may sense that there is something more that we are meant to live. We may realize that the choices and habits we have developed do not tend our souls effectively, but we don't quite know how to proceed. We have been given the passcode (grace through faith), but we seem flummoxed by the operating system. Too often we just give up and go back to what we understand and think we can control, while the garden runs wild and untended within us.

The Spirit within us blossoms in the ways Paul lists even when we are unaware, but it blossoms extravagantly when attended to and given what is needed to flourish. Tending is not the same thing as thinking about or learning about the fruit. To tend, we have to enter the garden. We have to deal with the pests, smell the fragrance of the blooms, and, above all else, refuse to give up. It is a process. The

fruit of the Spirit is a sign of union and not a template for mastery. People who do not really believe that transformation is possible will rarely experience the fruit of the Spirit as regular aspects of their lives. They may learn to mimic the actions, but that is like trying to eat the plastic fruit on your grandmother's dining table.

In Paul's letters, he offers us a number of different lists of *gifts* of the Spirit. Those lists include such things as prophecy, exhortation, tongues, wisdom, knowledge, and the like. Spiritual gifts are particular ways the Spirit chooses to work with us and within us. We do not choose them. They are bestowed on particular people for particular purposes. The *fruit* of the Spirit is a different concept altogether. Fruit is the product or the result of something—the evidence. In Matthew 7:15–20, in a short teaching about discernment, Jesus tells us that we will know the truth of people by the fruit of their lives.

The fruit of the Spirit is the image of God most apparent in us. John Duns Scotus, a thirteenth-century Scottish mystic, talked about the “univocity of being,” the idea that words used to describe God mean the same thing when used to describe humans. Therefore, the different aspects of the fruit are qualities of God, planted deeply within us to allow us to be who God most uniquely and specifically created us to be and to demonstrate that way of being to the world, thereby calling each person into their divine fullness. The fruit of the Spirit is the *imago Dei*—the image of God—for us to discover, recover, and live out.

I think of the fruit of the Spirit as streams of the Spirit's energy and values for the nourishing of the soul and of the world. We are the delivery system and the beneficiaries of the fruit's transforming power. Tending the wild garden is not about being a better person or a better Christian. It is about being a better expression of the One who dwells within us and even prays within us for our own needs and

the needs of a “fruit”-hungry world. The fruit of the Spirit is grace in skin.

TENDING HOLY GROUND

Paul’s image of the fruit of the Spirit gives us a lens through which we experience the radiant heart of God that is always loving, always relational, always moral, and always mysterious. Because that is the terrain we will till in this book, be aware as you study that you will be on holy ground. You might want to light a candle as you read, reminding yourself that your study is actually a form of prayer. You might want to take off your shoes, remembering that the bush is always burning. You might want to actually eat a piece of fruit, reminding yourself of the wondrous way the Spirit restores our Eden. Take your time. Gardens always take time.

In my own Reformed tradition, there has historically been a preference for the practical, social, and communal aspects of piety, over the more mystical and strictly personal experiences of spiritual life. Both of those aspects are important to me and have provided grace upon grace for me all my life. For that reason, this book will offer suggestions for both a grounded practical piety using what we learn of the fruit of the Spirit and glimpses of a personal and experiential practice as well.

Each chapter includes a look at obstacles to the maturing of the fruit in our lives. As all of us who have read the story of the first garden in Genesis 3 know, there is a snake in the garden, and one has to deal with it. Obstacles need to be addressed. Weeds need to be pulled. Each chapter ends with six days’ worth of Scriptures and questions for individual reflection or group discussion. My prayer is that, as you tend the wild garden within you, you will bear the Spirit’s perfectly ripened fruit for your life, your family, and our hungry world.

CHAPTER 1



THE SPIRIT OF THE GARDEN

We little know how much wildness is in us.

—John Muir

How do we talk about the fruit of the Spirit without turning the text into a cosmic to-do list destined to leave us feeling shamed, discouraged, or self-righteous about our own spiritual maturity? Perhaps it is best to start by considering the Spirit who raises a garden within us and invites us to welcome and tend it.

Speaking of the Holy Spirit is notoriously difficult. It is often like trying to nail smoke or describe something you thought you glimpsed, but when you turned around, it was gone. Questions about the Trinity and how the persons of the Godhead relate to one another and behave are guaranteed to make seminary interns cry and seasoned pastors squirm. Do we try to talk about the persons as personas, masks that the one Great One wears? Do we try to explain with examples like water, ice, and steam? Do we talk in terms of relationship, with ourselves as the

ultimate referent, *our* Father, *our* brother, *our* indweller? Do we try to satisfy our inquiring minds by sorting the persons of the Trinity into discrete roles—creator, redeemer, sustainer? This inquiry can be captivating and not without usefulness. It does, of necessity, eventually break down. They are One even as there are, we believe, spaces between them, places where they both interact and interpenetrate. Even the ancient believers who loved nothing more, after Constantine’s command, than to nail down the dictates of the faith could muster nothing more than “I believe in the Holy Spirit” for the Apostles’ Creed.

So rather than plumb theological waters too deep for me, I want to spend time in this chapter considering the *experience* of the Spirit, both in Scripture and in our personal lives, so that we may ponder what those experiences can teach us as we practice tending the garden of the Spirit’s fruit within us.

GOD’S SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Hebrew Scriptures, where there is, obviously, no articulated doctrine of the Trinity, God’s Spirit is still found everywhere. The word we usually translate as “spirit” in Hebrew is *ruach*. It is also the word for air, wind, breath, breeze, courage, and even temper. To be overwhelmed is to be breathless or spirit-less. This word is also used to describe the invisible, intangible, and fleeting quality of life itself in a person. Spirit is what distinguishes a living thing from a nonliving thing. In the Hebrew Scriptures, life begins when breath begins. So Spirit is always present, vivifying, elusive, unseen, but nonetheless felt.

A concrete example in the Hebrew Scriptures of what Christians call the Holy Spirit comes in the opening verses of the book of Genesis (1:2). There we see the *ruach* of

God moving over the waters of chaos, the formlessness and emptiness, and contemplating how to pull back those waters so that creation can emerge and take form. *Ruach* is the force of divine energy moving to create in love and for love. In these first verses of the Bible, we find the Spirit in pregnant wonder, imagining new life, bringing it to birth, releasing everything to love.

The Spirit is the divine energy of God that plants the garden of life for us and in us. It is God's divine power to the fullest. *Ruach* sorts light from darkness, brings things into being at the right time, spins planets, and sets boundaries around the chaos. This is not a picture of a meek, sweet Spirit that makes us feel better. *Ruach* is fierce. Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, "God is not nice. God is not an uncle. God is an earthquake."¹ When we consider such aspects of the Spirit's fruit as gentleness and self-control, we remember, too, that there is a bit of fierceness there. *Ruach* is an earthquake.

So, *ruach* is the fierce creative spirit that brings life to life. She is also the one who never gives up. *Ruach* is not discouraged by the chaos and emptiness of any age and is always bringing new life even when the ground seems fallow and there are no ingredients left with which to work. *Ruach* needs no ingredients. She is the ingredient. *Ruach* is undaunted by division and even destruction. Recently, amid the horrors of war in Ukraine, I saw pictures of high school students in their prom dresses posing amid the rubble of their destroyed school. Even in the rubble of human brokenness, *ruach* weaves defiant joy.

We see the wild, indomitable Spirit again in Ezekiel 37, where the fierce power of the Spirit and the Spirit's commitment to individuals and to communities is on full display. Throughout much of the book of Ezekiel, the prophet declares the doom of the coming exile of the people. He tells of Jerusalem's fall and the temple's

destruction. For him, the entire community, and God's promise with it, is like a vast valley of dried bones. Israel's inability to live as God intended has left it vulnerable and decimated. There is nothing left but death. Not even hope is left in the dried bones. Yet even at the moment when the worst happens, both internally and externally, the prophet tells us that the Spirit never gives up. The Spirit needs nothing from us, no potential, no goodness, not even hope. All the Spirit needs is her own fierce love that leads to life. When human beings give up in the presence of devastation and the consequences of faithlessness, the Spirit does not. God brings life from death. Verse 14 says, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil." The Spirit's very breath is the life force of all creation. The Spirit shakes the ground on which we stand, and that which we thought was solid, or dead and done, is once again malleable.

A second understanding of Spirit from Hebrew faith is Shekinah. While this word does not appear in the Old Testament, rabbis in the Talmudic period used this term to refer to God's intimate presence and special bond with God's people and God's world. Often talked about as a kind of ethereal light, the Shekinah surrounds people with holiness, mystery, and intimacy. The understanding of Shekinah is built on experiences such as the assurance in Exodus 29:45–46 that God will dwell with the people in a steadfast and experiential way. The Shekinah is God's mysterious yet intimate embrace.

My earliest memory is one I have come to associate with the Shekinah. Some of this "memory" comes to me from family lore, but some of it is as distinct as if happening right this moment. The context was the funeral of my paternal grandmother, when I was only three years old. My grandfather had died the year before I was born. My parents then left their own little home and moved into the family home where my father had been born. My

grandmother was a brittle diabetic who never fully recovered from the death of her husband. She loved me wildly, and I her. Each morning as breakfast was served to her in bed, I was wheeled in a stroller to her bedside, where she fed me bacon tidbits and crusts of toast with a little egg dripping from the edges.

In those days in the Deep South, funerals were often held in the home, so my grandmother's casket was set before the fireplace in the living room. Somewhere in all the planning, the decision was made that I was too young to attend, so I was taken across the street to my cousin's house. That is where my memory becomes distinct. I don't remember which older cousin had me by the hand, just that my arm was lifted high in that clutch. When we had safely crossed the street, I stopped and turned back to look at my house. I remember seeing the mourners in their black suits, the women in simple hats with small eye veils and black gloves, walking up the walkway and being welcomed into the home. Suddenly, I saw a bright golden light surrounding the house. It was spiky and almost pulsating. It looked a bit like the crown on the Statue of Liberty, dancing. I stared at it in wonderment. I was not afraid. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world. I knew that it was God, without a doubt. And I knew that God was surrounding and holding my family and my grandmother. Shekinah.

Shekinah teaches us that God is as present on earth as in heaven. There is a divine embrace of all creation, of each of our lives and communities. It surrounds us like a morning mist, and while we may think it burns off when the heat is high in our lives, it does not. Someone once described Shekinah as the beautiful One who re-souls us when we are at the point of pain and helplessness.

Sometimes it can be hard to feel divine love when our lives are less than perfect. Still, the Spirit's love surrounds

us with sweetness and power, whether we feel it or not. God's love is a part of us because the Spirit dwells within us, constantly looking for ways to support and free us. Love is who God is, and because of that, love is at the core of our own lives. It is as sure as sunrise—even more so.

Once, years ago, during a period of hardship in my life, I took some time away to write and reflect. To heal, really. To find some sense of warmth and direction. I went to a little cottage on the rocky coast of Nova Scotia. One morning, I was walking along the sandy beach when a dense fog rolled in. It seemed to come up quickly. It surrounded and disoriented me in seconds. For a moment, I panicked. I couldn't see my way home. So I just stood still and took deep breaths of the moist, salty air. I could hear the waves and the sea birds, but that was all.

Suddenly, I felt the fog itself become a kind of embrace, powerfully surrounding all of me, all the good and all the broken pieces of my heart and life. It felt like a divine hug, both tender and powerful. I knew then that all I needed to do to get to the cottage, and all I really needed to do in my life, was lean into that embrace and walk by the wild water until I found home. I knew, even though circumstances had not changed, that I was not alone in it all. God's Shekinah would never leave me.

From the Hebrew Scriptures we learn that God's Spirit is present on earth as a wild, fierce presence of creative love. This Spirit reaches out and embraces. It acts to bring life to life. It moves over the chaos of our lives and world, always looking for new starts. It is not about to be tamed by any words or human experience or expectation. The Spirit does not dominate, threaten, or coerce. The Spirit broods, creates, surrounds, dances, and liberates. After all, can any of us put a foot into the parted waters of the Red Sea in the hope of freedom without a little push from the Spirit?

GOD'S SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Much like *ruach* in the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament often uses the Greek word *pneuma* to represent the Spirit. Like *ruach*, it is the word for wind and breath. In addition, it describes the immaterial yet powerful essence of someone or something. It refers both to the Holy Spirit and to the inward being or personality of a person. In the New Testament, there is no cohesive doctrine of the Spirit. Sometimes the text speaks of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, or the Spirit of God as if those terms are interchangeable. Perhaps in the mystery of the Trinity, they are. We can, however, begin to understand the presence of the Spirit in Jesus' words and the early believers' experiences.

In Jesus' passionate farewell to his followers in John 14:15–31, he promises his friends that, in the context of love and obedience, he will ask the Father to send the Spirit to help them after he is gone. He first describes the Spirit as “another Advocate” (v. 16). The Greek word, *parakleton*, can also be translated as Helper or Encourager. In Greek writings, this was the word for a legal adviser, one who pleads another's case or acts as a proxy. The use of the qualifier “another” helps us see that the Spirit is one who will continue the same awakening, loving, redeeming work of Jesus' earthly ministry. This is perhaps why the Spirit is sometimes referred to as the Spirit of Christ. Spirit as Advocate adheres to the truth, provides a defense (even if undeserved), and acts on behalf of the people. For the frightened disciples in that upper room long ago, the promise of a divine defense attorney must have been welcome news indeed!

The connotation of *parakleton* as Helper reminds us that, as we saw with Shekinah, we are never alone. Jesus expands that notion in verse 18 when he tenderly tells

them that they will not be left “orphaned” and alone by the events that are about to unfold, even though Jesus will seem to be taken from them. This is a picture of the Spirit as adopter and rescuer.

About two years ago, my husband and I adopted a dog from a shelter nearby. Our beloved keeshond, Abigail, had died a few months earlier, and we were bereft. Our new dog, Bonnie, had known hard times. She had recently had puppies, and none of her puppies were found with her. When we went to pick her up, she was a wild thing. But we could feel the love in her. She bonded with us quickly, and now we cannot imagine our home without her. In a sense, we were Helper to her. In another sense, she was Helper to us. In that mutual adoption, we all experienced new grace.

Jesus is telling his friends that life in the Spirit will be similar to that, a mutual, loving, intimate relationship that changes everything, even deep grief. The Spirit comes, sees value, makes the case for our rescue, and then moves into the house with us.

Earlier, in verse 17, Jesus tells them more about the new Spirit that is on the way, “the Spirit of truth.” The Greek word *aletheia* refers not so much to truth as opposed to a lie, as it does to “big truth,” the truth that inhabits the very heart of things. It refers to the reality that is right before our eyes but sometimes out of sight at the same time. It is something that is actual, not counterfeit. It cannot be feigned. The *aletheia* that the Spirit insists on includes actual facts, of course, but also deeper realities. The Spirit of truth helps us by insisting that we confront our own blind spots or, at a bare minimum, acknowledge that they are there and that we do not know what we do not know. The Spirit of truth is an anti-arrogance potion. The Spirit desires that we examine our assumptions that hurt us and others. The Spirit insists that we take a look at the places in our lives

where we function by rote so much that we regularly miss the wonder of the moment and our abundant daily opportunities for life and love.

Later in John 14, after Judas questions Jesus' plan, Jesus tells them all that the Spirit he will send will be both teacher and memory aid. It is the Spirit who opens our eyes to truth and teaches us the meaning and implications of God's ways and how we are to live them out in the world. Jesus goes so far as to say that the Spirit will *cause us* to remember what he has said (v. 26). By the very act of remembering, we awaken to the truth and embody it more perfectly.

One of the problems that humans face is that we live in a state of forgetfulness. We forget God and the power of God's ways. We forget our own identity as God's beloved children, so we don't treat ourselves or others as sacred vessels in which God dwells. The Spirit reawakens us to what is actually real and true, in and through us. The expression of Spirit truth will look different in each one of us, as we are uniquely chosen and shaped for just what we and the world most need to receive and to offer.

The Spirit, as our inner knower, does not disclose a truth that is foreign to us. It is within us, just as the Spirit is within us. We have simply grown apart, become estranged by inattention or distracted by a false flickering light that has been foisted on us by others we see as authoritative but who do not appreciate the truth. Even so, the Spirit gives us a questing spirit, a desire to arrive home again even if via a circuitous route. The Spirit inspires this kind of need in order to meet this kind of need. It is not certainty that meets our need for knowing. It is trust.

From the apostle Luke, in Acts 2:1–13 we get another glimpse into the Spirit's power and priorities. In this post-resurrection story, just after the disciples meet to discern the proper replacement for Judas, Peter and the others

are gathered in Jerusalem when the heavens open and the Spirit descends on them like a rushing violent wind (as *ruach*) and settles on all those present as tongues of fire above each head. Fire, that profound biblical symbol for power and purification, does not descend as one great blanket of fire. It is individual. Each person receives the power and the cleansing that each so desperately needs in order to face the challenges and the wonders of post-resurrection life. Spirit fire also burns away injustice and division from them as a body. The text doesn't say that suddenly everyone speaks and understands Aramaic or Hebrew. It does not say that some new and heretofore unknown language is revealed. Rather, the text says that each understands what God is doing in his or her own language. No one language dominates. No one culture dominates. Each stands on its own and receives the truth and the refining of Spirit in the way that it can be understood.

Spirit fire still burns away illusions, half-truths, and arbitrary divisions. It is the equalizing power of the Spirit that allows no language or people to dominate but enables each to understand the other from their own sacred knowing. The Spirit does not choose sides. The Spirit actually breaks down entrenched positions and creates something entirely new. That breakdown is not one of destruction. The sides are not devalued or destroyed. They aren't even combined or melded. They are transformed, reconciled, united. A new thing has come.

Finally, I want to lift up one additional glimpse into the Spirit in the New Testament: the Spirit dwelling within us. For example, in Romans 8:9, the apostle assumes the indwelling presence of the Spirit as the ultimate guide and arbiter of faith and ethics. For Paul, we are not simply inhabited by the Spirit as if we could wall off the Spirit in a cupboard under the stairs and release power

and insight only when comfortable or desperate. Rather, life and even our own bodies are infused with the One who is both wholly other and yet still one with us. With the understanding of the Spirit's indwelling, we no longer simply believe. We live and move and have our being experientially in Christ. Paul puts it this way: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). This amazing truth lies at the heart of my understanding of the fruit of the Spirit.

In Jesus' visitation with the disciples after the resurrection, he literally breathes the Spirit into them (John 20:22). Indwelling binds together the spiritual and physical in human life. What could be more incarnational than this? For reasons that boggle the mind, God chooses human bodies and human souls to manifest God's saving love in the world. From the moment Gabriel flutters into Mary's ordinary life with an outlandish action plan for the world, we have seen that the Spirit chooses human bodies to bring all that is needed into being. With Mary's powerful prayer, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), she invites the Spirit into every corner of her life, every cell of her being. As a result, she is the one who brings Christ Jesus into the world. It is helpful to remember that the Spirit, while always present, working and helping, delivers bounty most lavishly when invited and welcomed.

Our roles in life and the cosmos are much less pivotal than Mary's, but they are no less Spirit imbued. The Spirit's presence within us gives a sacramental quality to all of life. Concrete objects and actions, by intention and grace, carry the Spirit's nurturing power into the experience of ordinary living. We then realize that the Spirit fills us with indwelling hope, an inner flow of happiness and aliveness that never fails even when we fail to notice.

TENDING SPIRIT

Paying attention to the Spirit within us can be dangerous. After all, what if we really open up and the Spirit wants something more from us than we are prepared to offer? I remember nights, now more than forty years ago, when I was wrestling with my call to ordained ministry. At the time, I had just graduated from college with a degree in creative writing and was working as a waitress at Joe Namath's restaurant in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. For some weeks, the Spirit woke me up in the night with an uneasiness and longing I couldn't tame. I did not want to be a minister. I wanted to live over some delicatessen in New York and wait in the cold, with open-fingered gloves and a ratty shawl, for my short stories to sell.

Finally, one night in my distress I found myself crying out, "O Lord, I don't want to be a minister. If I become a minister, I'll never get to wear my little black strapless cocktail dress again, and it is not even paid for!" I could almost hear the angels laughing. What I did not know then, and sometimes forget now, is that the Spirit knows me better than that. The Spirit knows you better than that. Known as we are, the Spirit knows what we need and when we need it. The Spirit will not offer us more than we are ready to receive, even of the Spirit's own presence or fruit. So there is no need to be fearful of what the Spirit offers or the cultivation of the Spirit's fruit. The Spirit recognizes that one perfect raspberry is enough to get us to the next one.

So, how do we recognize the Spirit's nudging, cajoling, or fierce fire in our lives? This is not often as easy as we think. Our egos have the wily ability to convince us that just about anything we want is what the Spirit wants for—or from—us. That is often not the case. Discernment is necessary to keep us from making ourselves into our own little gods and ascribing our wants to the Spirit.

What are we to do? First, we recognize the Spirit by what the Spirit does, especially deep inside us over time. Too often, mere transactions substitute for true transformation in our spiritual lives. We pray for healing, and healing comes. Then we put the Spirit back in the cupboard under the stairs until somebody else we love gets sick. Or we pray for a windfall, and it doesn't come. Then we say, "Thanks anyway," and proceed to try to get what we want by hook or by crook. The Spirit is not much interested in the merely transactional. The Spirit is interested in the transformational. So if you want to see the Spirit's handiwork in your life, look deeply within at the ways that you have changed for the better over time. See if you can see, in hindsight, the small steps toward that change. That is the Spirit's dance, and you can learn her steps.

A second great hint of the Spirit is surprise, or what seems like chance. An old friend calls just as you are remembering them, and you get a shimmery feeling of synchronicity and the sense that all of life is one piece of cloth. Experiences of connections and unity are the Spirit's language. If we stop and think about these moments, nine times out of ten, we will see something we've been blind to or realize something that needs our spiritual or physical attention that we have been ignoring.

A third thing we can look for is a sudden, unexpected feeling of homecoming and peace. That is often the Spirit's signal to stop and pay attention. There is something real and precious to be experienced in this moment. It is something to draw from and to tuck away for safekeeping. One of my former parishioners used to keep homing pigeons. Occasionally he was asked to bring them to graveside services. When he released them, there often was a collective gasp of apprehension (would they do as they had been taught?) and wonder as we watched them twirl, get their bearings, and head together toward what they knew to be

home. In the Spirit, we are like that too. We may find ourselves in unfamiliar places, even grief-saturated places, but when we rise just a bit, the wind of the Spirit will always direct us toward home.

Finally, sometimes we have to learn a new language in order to discern the Spirit from ego. When we got our rescue dog, Bonnie, the first weeks were a wild exercise in cross-species communication. Frankly, she was better at it than we were. Eventually we learned that she responds best to both verbal cues and hand signals. It is the language that we have developed between us. Granted, sometimes it breaks down, but it is fairly reliable.

Each of us, as we delve into our relationship with the Spirit, will learn a new language of the heart. It may be a literal language, such as those who have the gift of tongues receive. For me, it is more a language of the heart that is formed by Scripture, experience, prayer, and the natural world. John Calvin said again and again that the two ways to know God are the Scriptures and the “theater of the creatures.”² For him, there was no sure path, or even stability, apart from those two languages. Whatever language you find, it will be the language of the deepest possible communion, with all of its predictability and wondrous unexpectedness. The more we awaken to the language of Spirit, the more supple and moldable our souls, and even our structures, will be to new expressions of love that are right for our moment in history.

When it comes to the Spirit, sometimes the theological answers feel dry. How does a theologian explain “luminous”? How does a theologian explain a three-year-old seeing a bright, golden, dancing crown around her home? How does a theologian explain shimmering, unbelievable transformation without resorting to stale formulas? All we can do is stand with Mary Magdalene in stunned wonder in the garden of death’s demise and hear the whisper in our own hearts, “*Rabbouni.*”

WEEDING YOUR GARDEN

One of my favorite saints is Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk Algonquin woman who is the patron saint of ecologists, the environment, and people in exile, all things close to my heart. What I love most about her, though, is her name. Tekakwitha means “she who bumps into things.” I can so identify with that. Every day my ego trips me up, my habits make me tired, and my blinders and expectations lead me far away from the mark of a fruitful spiritual life.

Paul is well aware of this tendency as he writes to the Galatian church. Before he gives his description of the fruit of the Spirit, he paints a very different picture of an unbalanced, ego-saturated way of life that produces bitter fruit within the soul and the community. He lists fifteen specific manifestations of an ego-ruled life (Gal. 5:19–21). We each can compile our own list of stumblings. We know that we make choices that drip poison in our hearts and make it difficult to hear the Spirit or awaken to our own healing. Before you move to the next chapter, take some time to clear the ground of your soul a bit so that the insights you receive will not get choked out. Do this with honesty, humility, and a bit of detachment. Don’t make excuses for what you see, but know that all is redeemable. Ask the Spirit to help you stand your ground emotionally as you seek to face your sin.

A WEEK FOR TENDING THE SPIRIT

These six daily Scriptures and reflections are designed to be used on Monday through Saturday, with Sunday being a time of worship with your community of faith. Or, if you are working through this book with a small group, you might want to start with Day One the day after your group meeting. Whatever pattern works for you is perfect.

Each day includes a Scripture reading to help you deepen your experience of the concepts in the chapter. I find benefit in doing my reflection in the morning and then returning to the Scripture at the close of day to see how the words have, or have not, informed my day. If you keep a journal, that is a great way to track this journey. I also find it helpful to write out the Scripture quotation in my own hand. This seems to give the words a deeper incarnational roost in me. You will quickly find what works best for you. Just be sure not to judge your practice against others, especially those in your small group. Harsh self-judgment is a powerful way to drown out the Spirit's voice. As Jesus says in the Beatitudes, you are blessed right now, not when you get your act together.

Day One: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:1–2). The word translated "wind" here is *ruach*. The Bible begins with the *ruach* of God sweeping over watery chaos and deep nothingness. What are the areas of chaos, darkness, or nothingness in your life, family, or world where you long to feel the Spirit sweeping, sorting, and bringing perfect light? How do you experience the Spirit in those areas of your life? Take a moment today to feel the wind on your face. Face into it if you can, and welcome the Spirit to sweep over your life.

Day Two: “The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones” (Ezek. 37:1). Ezekiel’s world is collapsing. All around him he sees destruction and decay, and he doesn’t see a way out. In this powerful vision, God’s Spirit assists him to face reality, to see the mess he and the people are in, how dire the situation is, and their inability to fix it on their own. For the Spirit to move to heal, it is often necessary that we face the real unvarnished truth of our lives. That is hard and sometimes painful, but it is the only way. Take a moment to think about any situations that seem dire and hopeless to you right now. How did it come to this? Tell the Spirit the truth. Don’t be afraid to feel what you feel. Devastation never has the last word. If you find today that you feel helpless and hopeless, take a moment to stop and breathe the Spirit into those situations. Ask the Spirit, with hope in your heart, “Can these bones live?” Then listen to the answers.

Day Three: “Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (Ezek. 37:9–10). God commands Ezekiel to call on the power of the breath/Spirit (*ruach*) to repair the damage done. Ezekiel—unsure, no doubt—obeys, and the Spirit comes and brings that which was dead to life again. Are there areas of your life that feel old, dead, and dried up? What about your family? Community? How have the accumulations of sin left devastation around you? Within you? Pause for a moment. Notice what comes to your mind. Write about it if you choose. Ask the Spirit to breathe new life into you and the situations that come to mind. Today, set out to notice

life signs in places where you usually don't expect to see them.

Day Four: "The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God'" (Luke 1:35). What follows this declaration is Mary's unequivocal yes. Let it be. What would it be like for you to say yes, let it be, today? How might God want the Spirit to empower you to be a God-bearer in your home, church, workplace, community? What would you need the Spirit to do for and in you in order for your witness to expand into a saving presence of love and freedom for those around you? Ask God to send you today just what you need. Try to notice those moments when you can bear Christ to others and bring saving love into their lives.

Day Five: "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (John 20:22–23). In this resurrection appearance, Jesus breathes the Spirit into his disciples and connects the work of the Spirit within them specifically to forgiveness. For us, forgiveness is often not easy. We may long to do it and still feel unable to do so. If the wounds are deep enough, we may not even think forgiveness is justified. We might feel guilty that we can't do it. The Spirit can help. The Spirit longs for our release from bondage and knows that if we don't forgive, the emotional consequences can be dire. Are there any persons whom you want to forgive? Do you struggle to accept forgiveness for yourself? Why is that hard? Write about this if you choose. Think about what unforgiveness costs you. Ask the Spirit to help you see where forgiveness is needed and to strengthen you to begin. Don't be unforgiving of yourself if you can't do it. Sometimes forgiveness takes many, many breaths of the Spirit.

Day Six: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom. 8:1–2). Paul is concerned about legalism killing people’s souls and faith. Here he reminds us that the Spirit in us is always about setting us free from all that is death dealing. Are there areas of your life right now where you feel bound in unhealthy ways? Are you sometimes overcome with trying to do everything and do it all with excellence? If you close your eyes and imagine true freedom for your life, what does that include? Write about that. Now look at what you wrote. Is your dream consistent with what you know to be true about God and the values of God’s ways? If yes, then ask for the Spirit’s aid to lead you into freedom. If you are not sure, ask the Spirit to be your teacher and help you sort it all out. Today, try to notice moments when you feel truly and expansively free. Ask God to create a durable, free, and open space in your heart for the Spirit to grow a garden.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Ask the group to share their understanding of the Holy Spirit before they read this chapter. Did reading this chapter change anything in your understanding of the Spirit? If you could write a whole book on the Spirit, what would you include?
2. The chapter emphasizes that the Spirit cannot be fully understood or contained. Given that, what things help you understand the Spirit and how the Spirit works?
3. In this chapter, I share a childhood experience that I associate with the Spirit. Have you ever had a specific experience of the Spirit in your life that you would be willing to share?

4. This chapter offers a few hints for noticing the Spirit's activity in a person's life. What would you add to that list?
5. John Calvin talked about knowing God through the Scriptures and the "theater of the creatures." In what ways does nature help you experience the Spirit? How do you see the suffering of the Spirit in climate change, wildfires, deforestation, and the like? How might your group address some of these Spirit wounds?
6. What did you find most illuminating, meaningful, thought provoking, or disturbing in this chapter? Share your insights with the group.