

Bananas!
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Galatians 5:1, 11-25

When we hear the word "fruit," the first thing that comes to mind is likely not contained in the phrases the "fruits of our labors" or "spiritual fruit." We think instead of the rainbow of good stuff in the produce aisle or growing in our gardens and orchards – you know, *fruit*, things like apples, bananas, grapes and tomatoes which even Cookie Monster eats in mass quantities these days. Of all the food items classified as "fruit," bananas are an impossible sell for me. They are more like "evil spawn" than a nutritious, edible item. When I was very small, I got some sort of GI bug, and the only foods that had any staying power at all were yogurt and – you guessed it – bananas. As my mother tells the story, we went grocery shopping one day not long after this bug had gone away, and no sooner had we walked into the produce section than I started proclaiming, "But Mom, I don't like bananas!" and didn't stop until we got home. I still can't bring myself to eat one, even after all this time. The smell and the texture are literally just too much to stomach.

Equally difficult to swallow in some ways is the idea that the freedom gained via our faith in Christ may not be what we think it is. Paul makes this point near the end of the Letter to the Galatians. He's spent most of the preceding four chapters wailing that he doesn't like bananas. In this case, the bananas are the Galatians' embrace of what Paul considers incorrect teaching from a rival group of preachers. Scholars think Paul traveled and taught in the region of Galatia, which is somewhere in modern-day Turkey, in the early 50s. After he left, another group of preachers arrived to fill the vacuum he left. This rival group had a slightly different take on how to live out one's faith in Christ.

This group is sometimes called "Judaizers" because of their insistence that one had to accept the Law first, before they could confess their faith in Jesus. The position wasn't all that unusual – remember, one of the apostles at Jerusalem thought the same thing, until Peter convinced them otherwise. The message this particular group of rivals brought to Galatia was probably along the lines of this: "Paul left them without the guidance of the law, prey to... the desires of the flesh, and that is why sin is still rampant" and repentance through strict observance is necessary to get rid of it.¹

Of course, Paul got wind of what they were teaching, didn't like it at all, and felt he had no other recourse but to send them this rant as a corrective. He argues, forcefully, that justification by faith in Christ is enough by itself. As he argues in the bit of Chapter 5 that the lectionary leaves out, the Spirit is doing its slow work of transforming the people of the Galatian church into a community that whose hallmark is a faith which works through love. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters... through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14-15, NRSV). The hard question the people in Galatia had to answer when they were presented with these two perspectives was who's right. Both of them are plausible. How can only one be right?

The main point of the whole Letter is that sole reliance on the Law as "the vehicle for God's Spirit" – as Paul's rivals taught – is not the way to go: "If the law could have

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 469-470.

been created that guaranteed life, then God would have created that law."² It is important to remember that the law is not bad, *per se*. Its ethical commitments and its demands for ensuring that the poor and marginalized are cared for are key components of Jesus' own teaching. However, the thing that the rival group apparently missed when it comes to the effect it has on everyday life is, that having faith in Christ changes the equation. As we heard last week, "now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:25-26, 29).

As a result, slavish obedience to the law, such as Paul's rivals taught, just isn't necessary any more – especially not when it only serves to get in the way of the authentic growth and development of Christians and their communities. Paul's "yoke of slavery" line serves to reinforce the idea that this thing does not help anyone to grow more loving or more Christlike, especially not when people go by the distorted presentation of the law made by Paul's rivals and not the far more generous interpretation Paul himself favored.

Remember: Paul is Jewish. Following the law is inherent to his way of life. BUT, he, like Peter before him, recognizes that through Christ, God has opened up a pathway where strict observance is not the way people are saved. That is Paul's point when he argues that "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law" (Gal 5:18). That,

² Alicia Vargas, "Commentary on Galatians 5:1, 13-25." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-13-3/commentary-on-galatians-51-13-25-2> [accessed June 21, 2022].

for him, is why it makes about zero sense for his rivals to insist that law leads to being led by the Spirit... especially where Gentile believers are concerned.

In other words: teaching anything but justification by faith alone is bananas – complete with the smell and the texture which make them all but impossible to swallow. For Paul, "the law is not a means to an end. It's a guide in the darkness, a path toward justice in the 'present evil age' (1:4)."³ However, what the law cannot do is to defeat the powers of sin and death on its own. It takes the Holy Spirit, working alongside the humans it inspires, to complete the dual tasks of transformation and redemption in the context of the constant fight with what Paul names as "works of the flesh." The so-called vice list he provides is fairly typical of such lists in that era. While it is not, "intended to be exhaustive, is overwhelming..." and it "... exists because the flesh has been corrupted by sin."⁴

Paul doesn't refute the detrimental effects of sin. What he does take issue with is how it's presented, and how much harm that presentation may have done to a community which wanted to continue to grow in its faith. Much to Paul's consternation, the Galatians "have welcomed these opposing teachers and their message—a message that Paul has labeled a distortion of the gospel, but that the church did not have enough training to discern as harmful... They wanted tangible markers of their new existence in Christ" – markers like being circumcised or refusing to eat shellfish.⁵

³ Carla Works, "Commentary on Galatians 5:1, 13-25."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-13-3/commentary-on-galatians-51-13-25-5> [accessed June 21, 2022].

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

These outward markers do not necessarily serve as signs of God's favor and goodness, or of how well the individual Christian is living into the relational aspects of their faith. To say that there is a definitive, one-size-fits-most, outward marker of what is essentially an internal growth process is also kind of bananas. Paul knew that, and that's what he's trying to get across to the members of the Church in Galatia: They need to look to things like joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, instead of at someone's body or dinner plate. To do that invites the sin of envy – and to the detriment of the whole community.

To espouse a life where our faith in Jesus is a central thing is to espouse a life of change and transformation. It can be downright scary at times to learn that the old ways we've come to take for granted are changing and evolving into some new thing, the shape of which is barely in focus. The changes the pandemic forced us to make around how we gather as the community known as St. James are probably the most obvious examples that come to my mind. I'm sure you all can name others as well. Regardless of our deeply held and deeply personal political and moral convictions, the task of discernment in this next bit is the same as it was for the Galatians. At its heart is figuring out what our bananas – the things which are good for us but not so tasty going down – are, and whether we will adapt, or to pick up a bag of cherries instead.

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being

made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.