

Monkey see, monkey do? Or does God in Christ have a different plan for you? Grace and peace to you from the 3 in 1, God, God's spirit, and God's only son!

I've been reading a little Dave Ramsey lately to home in on my financial priorities. In his book, "The Total Money Makeover" he tells the story of a study done on monkeys. He writes, "A group of monkeys was locked in a room with a pole at the center. Some luscious, ripe bananas were placed on top of the pole. When a monkey would begin to climb the pole, the experimenters would knock him off with a blast of water from a fire hose. Each time a monkey would climb, off he would go, until all the monkeys had been knocked off repeatedly, thus learning that the climb was hopeless.

The experimenters then observed that the other primates would eventually pull down any monkey trying to climb [the pole. Maybe they did this to protect them-- or maybe they were thinking if I can't have the bananas neither can you]. Then, the experimenters decided to replace a single monkey with one who didn't know the system at all. As soon as the new monkey tried to climb, the others would pull him down and punish him for trying. One by one, each monkey was replaced and the scene repeated until there were no monkeys left in the room who had experienced the fire hose. Still, none of the new monkeys were allowed to climb. The other monkeys pulled them down. No one monkey in the room knew why, but none were allowed to get the bananas."

Ramsey goes on to say, "We aren't monkeys, but sometimes we exhibit behavior that seems rather chimplike. We don't even remember why [we allow ourselves or others to make things harder than they need to be, but we do]." In his case, he's talking about debt and how we're often duped into using it as a tool to get ahead. In my case today, I want to talk about a few other myths we're conned into believing that prevent us from experiencing the taste of the "luscious, ripe bananas" Christ speaks of, meaning the true freedoms we have in Christ Jesus. Now, before you start thinking, "who's she calling chimplike? She's the monkey comparing Christ's freedom to bananas," let's take a look at our Gospel story for this morning to understand where I'm going with this.

In our text for today, "Jesus' disciples are undergoing a very intense apprenticeship with Jesus, and it is about to get far more intense as he begins his journey to Jerusalem. Before embarking on this journey south, Jesus pauses to check in with his disciples near the northern city of Caesarea Philippi.

'Who do people say that I am?' he asks (Mark 8:27). This is a relatively easy question. The disciples simply report on the buzz they have heard among the crowds. Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others, one of the

prophets. Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing has indeed borne resemblance to that of the great prophets of Israel. The responses are not far off the mark, but they do not quite get to the heart of the matter.

Then Jesus asks his disciples a more pointed question: 'And you, who do you say that I am?' Peter, so often the first to speak, responds, 'You are the Messiah' (Mark 8:29). Of course, we who know the whole story know that Peter has given [what appears to be] the right answer. Yet the [intent behind the] answer Peter gives is not actually [what Jesus wanted to hear]. The title "Messiah" in Hebrew or "Christ" in Greek was associated in Jewish tradition with an anointed king, a royal figure from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel's independence and glory." Jesus was and is definitely that person, but his way of going about this Messianic call totally opposed Peter's expectations. A Messiah who has come to free Israel from oppressive rule by using love and mercy instead of oppressive rule is not the kind of Messiah Peter or his contemporaries wanted. They expected Jesus to use force, not death on a cross to turn their world around.

After Jesus asserted his plan, telling the disciples to tell no one, Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to convince him of his flawed ideas. At this, Jesus gets upset, understandably. "Get behind me Satan," he shouts. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus continues, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Wow! Those are some heavy words, but who can blame Jesus. He's tired of running around with a bunch of monkeys who aren't getting it! Now do you see where I'm going? Jesus is like, "Ugh, these people! They keep knocking each other off the pole leading to what are the luscious bananas of life, that being, their actually eternal freedom soon to be confirmed through me!" Subsequently, Jesus commits to getting it through their heads that the threat of being drenched by a fire hose is no longer a needed worry. Rather, what needs to be of concern is coming together to make those bananas attainable!

So how does all of this apply to us now? Well, a great place to start is to perform a good self-check-in. Take a moment. What threats to wholeness and Christ's healing love are coming at you like a fire hose today? Is it the world's worries, is it climate change, financial woes, broken relationships, health concerns, misguided choices, feelings of self-doubt? Ask yourself, can any of these things separate you from the love of God? Are any of these things actually preventing you from reaching for and attaining Christ's freedom? The answer is no! And if that frustrating voice within your head tells you otherwise, like Jesus, all you have

to say is, “Get behind me, Satan.” For that voice is not a truth-teller. Let’s practice shouting “Get behind me, Satan” on three. Ready? 1..2..3!

Also, to unabashedly overextend this metaphor, consider what you presume are God’s bananas leading to the good life today. More often than not, God’s freedom isn’t what we want or expect it to be. Do freedom and the good life equate to having power over people? Does it equate to having money that you hoard or spend frivolously on material things? Dave Ramsey’s book is a good one for debunking the myth that life is all about “keeping up with the Joneses.” Money and power aren’t bad in and of themselves. We can use money for good and we can link our God-given powers with others to create “power-with-and-alongside,” thus manifesting the common good for all. It’s how we use or abuse the tools God gave us that matter to God.

Speaking of which, we can use each other as tools to attain freedom and unlike a bunch of bananas, there’s more than enough of God’s freedom to go around. So often we pull each other down. Even worse, we let people pull us down from reaching what’s been made available to all. Instead, may we set our minds on divine things, not human things. May we hoist and lift each other up the pole in love. May we deny ourselves and others those pesky threats of oncoming sprays to the face or misconceptions of what are God’s potassium-packed freedoms offered to us in Christ. May we take up our crosses so we can live the kind of life God intended for us.

Switching gears (I’m now deferring to a whole different metaphor here), what does it mean to take up our cross? As usual, this action doesn’t entail what we sometimes think it does. Whereas today, “taking up one’s cross” is often used as a metaphor for personal anguish and outright submission to higher powers,” back in the day, the cross was actually a symbol to fear for the Jews. At this time people didn’t affiliate the cross with Christianity yet or even Jesus for that matter. Rather, the cross only meant one thing for Jews: death by crucifixion.

“Crosses were a common sight when Mark wrote [his gospel], since there was a Jewish [rebellion] underway [against the Roman empire].” Therefore, many Jews saw their friends or relatives die on crosses. So, it makes sense that Peter and Jesus’ disciples would find his affinity towards a cross rather confusing. Again, Jesus was not supposed to die, especially in such a torturous way. But Jesus, “in contrast to Judean nationalists who were recruiting patriots to ‘take up the sword’ against Rome, Mark’s Jesus invited disciples to ‘take up the cross’”—to act in a way that would send strong and clear messages of resistance to those working to invoke violence out of fear or for the sake of national or personal gain. Imagine if we used the cross more often in that light. I think people would start to see Christianity differently.

Again, Jesus had plans to lift high a cross of love and wholeness through the joyous proclamation of God's grace. Jesus, in dying on the cross, desired that the cross represent love and inclusion for God's people--not fear, not death, nor violence, or exclusion. Nor did God intend we ever flash the cross while overindulging on the wrong kinds of things that work against God's will.

Said differently, to take up our cross then, doesn't mean we use it to stake a claim on someone, something, or our opinions to prove we're better than anyone else, especially because, without Christ, we really are a bunch of monkeys failing to reach the top. Rather, when we take up our cross, we're committing to straightening out the intentions and priorities we use to assert our actions in the world. Do we act out of fear most of the time, or do we act in loving ways toward ourselves and others that are true to the freedoms we have in Christ Jesus? Do we misconstrue what is actually the good life? Do we prioritize our political opinions and views, our cell phones, our worries, our wants over and above our friends, families, and our neighbor? Or do we truly believe that the good life, as God intends it, entails healthy habits and connections, and communications with others that lead to healing and restoration? Enough with the divisiveness people! Enough with the overconsumption! May we get back to what are truly the "luscious, ripe bananas" of life.

My dear friends, whether you believe we started out as monkeys or not, you have to admit, at certain times, depending on the day, we sometimes act like we haven't evolved at the rate God hoped. Be that as it may, God loves us anyway, and if we truly believe that, we can act and live in ways that are smarter and truly more fruitful (see what I did there? Bananas are fruit. Haha!) Ok, enough with the metaphor. All I'm saying is, go bananas in life! (I can't stop)! Meaning, go out and live your lives generously and with love in your hearts for yourself and others. If you do, you will be rewarded in countless ways. It really is that simple. Thank God for that! Amen.