

Sermon preached by Mr. Rob Mackey at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 27, 2010

BEYOND BANANA BREAD

John 6:47-51

The sun was shining through the kitchen window, highlighting the fruit bowl. Four shriveled, black bananas were illuminated by the dawn of a new day.

There seems to be a tendency in our house to buy seemingly healthy food, but not eat it quickly. Just days before, these bananas were a bright yellow, with just a tinge of green. I like to wait until the bananas sport a few speckles of black. I like them ripe.

I was pondering the blackened bananas' fate as my wife entered the room. I asked her, "Honey, do these look beyond banana bread to you?" It was Shirley's custom to take bananas that had advanced past the point of human consumption and give them new life by making banana bread. "Looks like a science experiment to me," she said, her way of letting me know that banana bread was out of the question.

I stared at the bananas as a symbol of lost hope. Just two weeks ago, they were ready to meet the minimum daily requirement of potassium, and now they were about to get a less than proper burial at the landfill. Two weeks ago, amazing potential. Now, just incredible I unedibles.

When our daughter Lacey was a little girl, she told me she didn't want to eat the bananas when the outside skin started to ripen (when the black spots start to appear). "It doesn't look good," she said. "Ah, but that's where you're wrong," I replied. Suddenly, I felt as if the wisdom of an 80-year old grandfather was welling up inside of me. Taking the ripened banana from her, I began to peel it. "Outside," I said, "the banana *does* appear to be less than appetizing. But as you peel it, you can see that it is perfect inside." Her eyes widened. "Wow"!, she said.

Seizing this teachable moment, I continued. "**And that banana is a lot like life.** We tend to judge people and situations by what we see on the outside. But **when you take a closer look inside, things aren't always as they appear.**" She went away satisfied, wolfing down her banana. I sat glowing by my seemingly innate ability to turn a piece of fruit into a lesson about life.

The bowl of blackened bananas taught me something else about life. During our journey, there is a window of opportunity during which we must act. Or else that opportunity disappears. Of course, there is one last hope: we call it banana bread.

THE GIFT

Some time ago, I returned to my office while still recovering from surgery; the pain was still with me. I felt just well enough, or so I thought, to call a colleague who was at home recovering from cancer surgery.

It was her second cancer operation. They got it all and her prognosis for recovery was excellent. To talk to Linda on the phone, an enthusiastic woman in her late 40s, you wouldn't have known she was staring down death for the second time in her life. Her southern twang resonated on the phone as alive as life gets. She thanked me for the plant I had sent, and the discussion turned to dealing with medical problems and the curve they had thrown us in our lives. Although my condition was not life threatening, the call suddenly turned from me cheering her up to the other way around.

In addition to the cancer surgeries, Linda had also lost her husband several years before. In less than a decade, she had been through a lot. "Linda," I said, "how have you gotten through all of this?" I knew I would have been devastated and beyond consolation. "Rob," she said quietly, "sometimes it takes years to see the gift."

The gift. The *gift*? There was a gift in all of this? "Oh, yes," she says. "You see, it all started with the death of my husband. It was very difficult at the time. But in the years that followed, all kinds of wonderful things have happened in my life that would not have happened if he was still alive. For instance, my daughters and I have grown so close. And I might never have found this job working to help people with mental illness. It has taken time, but there has been a gift in all this pain.

Sometimes it takes years to see the gift. In the time it took to make a short phone call, Linda gave me the gift. I had been hurting and not getting better much faster. It was hard to think that it was all a gift. But years later I can say the hours and days and weeks and months of pain became a lifetime of gain. I began to change on the inside. Things that I had taken for granted I took for granted no more. I call it God's sledgehammer. He has to get it out and use it once in a while for us to understand what we do have, and what a gift life really is.

I remember Linda ruminating about whether to continue her magazine subscriptions, because she didn't know if she would be here the next year to enjoy them. But she was. Linda described it like this: "Most people fret about having to turn 50, I'm just thankful getting to turn 50." Although Linda only lived a few years more, she gave the gift of knowing there may be a gift in my circumstances: maybe not today or tomorrow, or next week or next month...but in time, you may be blessed to understand God's plan.

The Bible is filled with stories of despair, pain, and seemingly unforgivable sin combined with amazing ongoing redemption.

Take David, for example: An ancestor of Jesus, David went on to become the greatest king of Israel, yet David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had Bathsheba's husband Uriah murdered. But David was quick to genuinely seek God's forgiveness.

He was also willing to suffer the consequences for his actions. David was a betrayer, adulterer, and murderer. Yet he had also slain a giant, was a shepherd, poet, and in God's words: "A man after my own heart."

Of course, Jonah is another familiar character to us: Running away from the Lord after God told him to go to Nineveh to preach against the wickedness in that city. He offered himself to be thrown overboard as the ship he was on was wildly rocked by a storm. And he safely spent 3 days and nights in the "Great Fish" hotel. Our Great God of second chances gave Jonah another shot at Nineveh. The people renounced their sin.

And how can we forget Adam and Eve, partaking of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and introducing sin into the world, and its consequences. Still, they were the Father and Mother of the Human Race. And that's actually pretty important to all of us!

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul writes "to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. Paul says "we have redemption through the blood of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding." The riches of God's grace.....that amazing grace through Jesus. That grace is available to me and to all of you.

I grew up the son of a radio broadcaster. After my father passed away I went on to become a radio journalist. In my hometown of Hutchinson, Kansas, I visited Hutchinson Heights to report on this newly opened facility built especially for adults with severe disabilities. They were remarkable people. One man paralyzed from the neck down demonstrated an electronic butler that could turn lights on and off with voice commands and gave him control of things that otherwise would be fraught with frustration and difficulty, if not being nearly impossible. As a result of the story, the administrator of the center came to me with an idea. He was going to ask the residents of Hutchinson Heights to participate in a writing contest about Christmas. Dave wanted me to serve as judge and select the winner. I was a little nervous but said yes. And that decision changed my life.

Even though we're still a ways from Christmas.....allow your mind to float to the holidays as I share with you...."The Magic of Christmas."

"My name is Kevin Henderson and I believe in the magic of Christmas. I believe in Santa Claus, Rudolph, Frosty, presents, lighted trees, little children laughing, grandparents smiling, and elves busy at work in the North Pole.

"Christmas is the magic that can stop wars, feed the hungry, bring warmth to the cold and joy to the sad heart. I cannot walk or talk or reach out easily to anyone. But I can see and feel the magic of Christmas, as the whole world becomes silent for a moment to remember the little baby born so long ago.

"In my heart I know this child. I can talk to him, walk with him, and reach out to him. Our hands and hearts touch, and I am once again overcome by the Magic of Christmas."

These amazing words came from the brain of a man who was confined to a wheelchair. He could not walk or talk. While his body was not able, his mind clearly was.

Twelve days ago, my mother had a stroke at her retirement community in State College, PA. Upon hearing the news, I jumped in the car to be with her in the hospital. The left side of her body was totally paralyzed. She could speak, but only out of the right side of her mouth. It was shocking to see this once vibrant woman, who loved people, poetry and politics, struggle to bring words to her lips.

But as my brother and two sisters gathered from Iowa and Kansas to join us, our mother amazed us with stories such as the day of my birth, how one sister pushed the other sister down the stairs in a baby buggy, and it went on and on. We have been given such a gift these past few days. Not everyone gets a chance to say goodbye. We have had that chance, and opportunities to reminisce, laugh, cry, apologize and forgive. I did a blanket apology for all the things I did as a child. Being a father, I guess I got the payback. But God's grace provided us such wonderful kids.

Hospice was called in Friday, and Mom appears to be in her final days. Yet through this adversity, our mother has taught us that you can have an impact to the end.

Are you beyond banana bread? Does your life look battered and bruised and beyond redemption? Have depression, or money problems, or serious health issues, or job loss left you thinking that God is done with you? Thanks to the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, who took our sin to the cross, on the inside, just like that bruised banana, you are pure and without blemish. Jesus said "I am the bread of life. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." If you have declared Christ as your Lord and Savior, you have the bread of life eternal.

Who knew you could learn so much about life from a banana? I guess that's why they call it, quite possibly, the world's most perfect food.

Amen.