

“Fruity Christians:  
June 30, 2019  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

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2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14  
Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Let me begin by telling you that I come in to this reading of Paul’s words to the Galatians with a little bit of baggage. Maybe more than a little bit. You see, to have this scripture show up on the Sunday we celebrate 50 years of the modern LGBTQ Pride movement, well, it takes a little bit of work. I could have skipped it in favor of one of the other three scripture options. But being in a relationship with the Bible is like being in a relationship with anyone you love. When you have trouble understanding one another, you do better to not sweep your misunderstandings under the carpet-- or stuff them into a closet. They will always come back to find you. Better to put on your big girl pants and face them head-on.

Now, there is lots that’s easy to love about this passage. So let’s start with some of the good:

- For freedom, Christ has set us free. You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters.
- For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And this one, which is so great that we teach it to our children in a song:

- The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I want to highlight these things first, because if you get nothing else out of this sermon, these words of Paul’s deserve props.

Before I go on to the other parts of the text, the ones that are more challenging and tempt me to preach instead on Elijah like I did 3 years ago when these same scriptures popped up in the lectionary, let me tell you a little bit about the history I bring to this text.

There were people in my life, faithful Christians, who taught that if you pray to do the will of God, God will ask you to be miserable. God will ask you to give up the things you

love. If you desire something, it is probably going to pull you away from God, because God wants you to have no fun. Have you known any Christians like that?

Now, I knew better than to believe these people in my life.. Nevertheless, they were conversation partners throughout my faith journey growing up as a religious girl in the Bible belt.

These voices showed up again when I came out in college, and they would not shut up. They were the voices with signs, protesting at Pride Parades each year I marched, telling me, "Repent Sinner!" and "You Are an Abomination!" and "God Hates Fags!" (I might not say this, because our children shouldn't have to hear it).

And I could mostly deal with that. They were so extreme, it was easy to tune them out. The more painful voices were those who claimed to "love the sinner but hate the sin." Their love always felt conditional to me-- like I am only loveable inasmuch as I can cut myself off from that part of me which they clearly judged. The most painful voices, however, were from my own family, the Presbyterian Church (USA), who, always in their very Presbyterian, "decently and in order" way, would reduce my identity to a simple sex act, rather than a way of loving, a way of being family, a way of being fearfully and wonderfully made by my Creator, a way of responding to the love Christ had set within me.

The denomination as a whole has come around, which is why I can stand before you today, though there are certainly many churches that have a long way to go before they can be fully welcoming of all God's children.

So, I do have my baggage. There was a time I was more comfortable going to a gay bar than I was setting foot in a church. I felt betrayed by the people who baptized me, but then could not honor the way the Holy Spirit had continued its work with me, calling me into ministry and calling me into love.

However, in the gay bars in Atlanta (where I lived through most of my twenties), that was a place where my spirit felt at home. There was one bar that held a Gospel Brunch each Sunday, led by drag queens. It was full of people who could not sit and feel welcomed in the pews of their churches. *They knew all the words* to these old hymns, and it was clear that their love of God, their love of Jesus, had not left them, even if their churches had abandoned them. You could see on their faces, some with tears streaming down their eyes, that they were feeling joy in the gospel and welcomed in the

eyes of God, with the drag queens as their priests, wearing feather boas as their vestments. It may have been a gay bar, but it really was *church*.

So now, back to Paul. Here's the thing about Paul. He says this beautiful thing about freedom in Christ. He talks about how we are no longer bound to the law. He talks about how what our flesh looks like doesn't matter in God's eyes. Specifically, he was saying that God didn't care whether people were circumcised, as the Jewish law requires, or not circumcised-- that Christ has set us free from the laws of the flesh.

But then, he goes on to point out exactly what desires of the flesh should be unlawful. And that's where I want to stuff my ears and just ignore Paul, as I tend to do when he says things that I find absurd, like, "Women should be silent in the churches" or "Slaves, obey your masters." So, when Paul says, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires," I want to push back on Paul. I guess he had some baggage too. I know early Greek philosophy, especially the teachings of Plato, shaped Paul's thinking. Plato taught that the spirit and the body are separate, and the body is inferior, and should be controlled, so that the spirit can grow to new heights. Paul took this to heart, and even chose celibacy and encouraged others to do so, so that they could focus on their spiritual sides-- but if you are not practicing self-control, Paul instructed his readers in Corinth you "should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9).

What Paul seems to not get is that Jesus did not separate body from spirit. In fact, he brought the spiritual into physical, earthly things: bread. Wine. Water. Body. Blood. In Jesus, God came to live in a body, and showed us that God can inhabit our bodies too. Sometimes I wonder if maybe Paul had known the tender love of another's embrace, and even the flame of passion, he may be given the gift of knowing a little more of who God is, and of Jesus' passionate love for the world.

That brings us back to the first in the list Paul gives us of the fruits of the Spirit. Love.

Rooting ourselves in love points us in the right direction to grow all those other fruits of the Spirit: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

A lot of people want to see themselves as spiritual. One of the growing groups in America, the group of people who consider themselves "Spiritual But Not Religious," has grown to over one quarter of our population. According to the Pew Research Center, a survey in 2017 found that 27 % of Americans consider themselves "Spiritual

but not religious,” which is up 8 percentage points from 5 years earlier. Over those same 5 years, the number of people who consider themselves “Religious and Spiritual” has shrunk, from 59% to 48% of Americans.

When I was growing up, my stepmother was a spiritual seeker. She and my dad both meditated. On top of that, my stepmom was always reaching for something that would increase her sense of peace and connection in life. For a few months, she hung crystals throughout the house, which would cast rainbows when they caught the sun. She hoped they would transform the spiritual energy of the house. Then one day, the crystals were gone, and she started talking to angels. My three year old brother thought this was fun, so when he started to talk about the “beautiful lady” in his room, my stepmom just knew it was a miracle. But that ended, and then my stepmom befriended a new-age nun, who had changed her name from “Mary Jones” to “Primshakti.” My stepmom began acting like this woman, and together they decided to only wear purple clothes, because somehow they figured that purple helped them connect with a deeper spirituality.

While I may sound dismissive of the lack of rootedness in my stepmother’s spiritual seeking, I know that it all came from a longing that was very very deep and also very authentic. At the heart of this longing was a need to connect to God’s deep and steadfast love.

An old slur that people used to use against gay people was to call them “Fruits”-- maybe they were just a little too sweet, a little too squishy. It’s not the worst thing people can come up with. In fact, I think we should all try to be a little fruity, bringing forth these fruits of the Spirit of which Paul writes. And if we can start with love, maybe it will save us a lot of extra work, a lot of fruitless searching. Rooting ourselves in God’s deep and steadfast love, and sharing that love with our neighbors, now that is fertile ground that will bring forth all kinds of fruit.