

Sermon – 6th Sunday After Pentecost – July 12, 2020

Romans: 8:1-11

There is therefore 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. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Has your heart ever felt so full that it could burst? So full of love, full of anticipation, full of excitement, full of joy, full of possibility, that it hurts? Today's text from Romans is one of those texts that makes my heart want to pop open like a confetti cannon spraying goodness all around. I feel this way because of the freedom and promise contained in Paul's words about our relationship with God and all creation through Christ.

Romans, chapter 8 is a hinge chapter. It shifts us from what Professor Ann Jervis from Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, calls the "shadowlands" of faith" to what I would describe as a place airy with comfort and security that affords freedom and confidence. Paul begins with a hopeful conclusion to the struggle with sin that we explored in chapter 7 last week. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1).

These are words of freedom. To be free from the weight of condemnation allows us a lightness, a place of openness and exploration rather than fear and judgment that shut us down. It is in these conditions of safety and growth that human thrive. Instead of expending energy on survival, the fight-flight-fold responses of our central nervous system, we can engage our thinking, our curiosity, and our creativity. And this is where the magic happens, where I would argue we live into our fullness as beings made in the image of God to be co-creators with God who craft a life-giving existence.

Paul describes this place as a state of *being in Christ Jesus*. This state of being, not doing, not thinking, not considering, characterizes a connection to our deepest self. Some might label this our heart or our soul. For me it is our center of Divine connection, it is the place where the unconditional love of God given to us resides, the place from which our most meaningful prayer and intention springs, the gateway for healing to enter and grow. According to Paul, this way of

being is created by the law of the Spirit, and is a state liberated from the law of sin and death (8:2). It is sustained by God's Spirit and brings right relationship with God (righteousness), life, and peace.

Each of our texts today embody an abundance of life that flows from living in this law of the Spirit. Both Isaiah and Matthew speak of abundance in nature, of God's provision through the land. Isaiah compares the Word to lifegiving rain and snow that brings fertility to the dry land from which nature provides seed to the sower and bread to the eater (55:10). Metaphorically, nature comes alive with mountains and hills bursting into song while trees in the fields clap their hands (55:12). Matthew writes of the Word of God planted in good soil, those ready to receive it, to bring forth an exponential harvest. Our human response our response figures significantly in Matthew and Paul's narrative, receiving what God offers and advancing God's initiative in the world.

And yet, how many of us really live our lives from this place of union with the love and mercy, abundance and joy given to us? I know, in my experience, this reality is often clouded by the forces of the world that run counter to it. My freedom and creativity, my belovedness are obscured by the noise of conflict and hate; by the temptations of that which is newer, shinier, more; by the distractions of this and that—urgent today, forgotten tomorrow; and by the fatigue of always running, it seems.

This is the very contrast Paul acknowledges in the text, using flesh and Spirit. Before I go deeper into this contrast, it is worth taking a short detour into this language of flesh. In a world where we are never thin enough according to societal forces, where our bodies can all too easily fail us, it is important to note that Paul's language of flesh being in contrast to the Spirit is not support for this dismissive posture toward our bodies, but rather the things that degrade our bodies. Your body, my body in whatever shape, whatever size, whatever nimbleness or stiffness, whatever physical strength or fatigue is the very container into which God's Spirit is poured, a container created and inhabited by God who loves and provides for it.

In Paul's contrast he invites us from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from life that might be stuck or sluggish to something more. His proclamation of bring in Christ, of living according to the Spirit pulls us beyond our self-focus, our flesh to the passions and energies of Christ that reaches far and wide, toward others. In doing so we come to rely on a power beyond ourselves, beyond all that the world knows to find the freedom promised to us.

As Christ fills us with his peace, his abundance, his love, we are freed from trying to fill those needs from within ourselves and can focus our energy on those around us, in essence extending Christ's work of inviting and healing and filling and providing in our world. In many ways I see this as catalyzing an upward spiral of wellbeing. Intuitively it makes sense and now science echoes this phenomenon too. For example, a study conducted by researchers from both Harvard and UBC found a consistent pattern of greater happiness among people who reported spending money on others, what the team called "prosocial" spending rather than buying something for themselves. Likewise, in my compassion research the idea of compassion fatigue

Pastor Darianne Harris
Advent Lutheran Church

has been refuted. Helping someone, relieving their suffering, does not in fact drain you if you really have agency to make a difference, it actually gives you energy from a dopamine hit that triggers reward in your brain and prompts you to repeat the action for another dopamine hit or more reward. It's the same mechanism at play when you can't just eat one potato chip, or one chocolate.

The call to and benefit from this outward focus, this sense of connection and relationship does indeed weave the extraordinary. This is who we are called to be as the church, as God's people here in this place. We are called and we are also equipped! And in this way, even amidst a world that seems to be imploding on itself, fraught with pandemic and polarity; displacement and racism; economic uncertainty, poverty and an ever increasing division of wealth; a suspicion of facts and fake news, we can be bold, knowing that the Spirit of Christ dwells in us, filling us with confidence and courage to break through the discord, to point to hope and inclusion and well-being for all people, that all would be welcomed into the richness and beauty that is life in the Spirit flowing from a good and gracious God who designed it to be so.

My heart is bursting, might yours be too? AMEN.