

July 16, 2023

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Romans 8:1-11



This might sound a bit odd for a priest, and even more a NT scholar, but to be honest I often struggle to enjoy the writings of Paul. This is unfortunate since around a quarter of the entire NT was composed by this one man, but for me it's just a fact that Paul's often rather dry and at times even convoluted writing can sometimes leave something lacking in terms of spiritual inspiration. However, there are certain passages in the Pauline corpus that are nothing short of spiritual goldmines: far from being dry and technical, these particular chapters shine forth with transformative, life-changing, and life-giving truth. Our epistle reading this morning from Romans 8 is, in my opinion, one of these Pauline goldmines.

In this chapter, Paul contrasts two very different ways of living in the world: by the flesh versus by the Spirit. In my homily this morning, I'd like to briefly sketch out—in a contrasting way—these two basic orientations to life, before concluding with some suggestions about how we each might cultivate the better path, the life of hope and peace, a life rooted not in the flesh but in the Spirit of Christ.

So to begin, what do these two different lifestyles look like in practical terms? First, living according to the flesh is, by and large, our default mode. While we might not be too keen to admit it, most people—myself included—tend to live as if we are the center of reality. If I'm hungry, generally my primary and overriding objective is to get myself some food. If I'm tired, generally my first, second, and third goals are to get myself some rest. I might not like to admit it, but when push comes to shove, I'm almost always going to look out for my wellbeing first of all: I'm going to ensure that I'm well-fed, well-clothed, and well-housed before even considering helping others. To some degree, this survival mindset seems hard-wired into us as humans. We arrive on this planet preprogrammed to put on our own oxygen mask before helping those around us. But while this survival mentality is probably necessary, it's not a terribly satisfying or meaningful way to live. We were created for so much more than simply survival—and our hearts, deep deep down, know that we were made for more. We were made for more than merely surviving by putting ourselves first, and we were also made for more than the many other ways life in the flesh expresses itself—such as whenever we are petty, hold grudges, refuse to forgive, or whenever we look down on others in judgment, arrogance, and self-righteousness, or whenever we act with greed or lust or.... the list goes on and on and on, but I think you get the point.

By contrast to these expressions of life in the flesh, the “more” that we were made for, the “more” that we intrinsically desire in our heart of hearts is described by Paul as “living in the Spirit.” This life by the Spirit is truly counter-cultural and can even seem just downright ridiculous to many 21st-century humans. But, most importantly, life in the Spirit is where everything we most truly desire is found: where

true freedom, profound peace, and unearthly joy are located and accessed. Life in the Spirit of Christ is characterized by many kinds of beautiful behavior, like compassion, forgiveness, and self-control. But perhaps before anything, life in the Spirit involves learning how to pay attention, learning how to quiet down physically, mentally, and spiritually in order to hear God’s whisper and to notice how God, often very subtly, is working. And then, even more challenging, life in the Spirit of Christ involves letting go: letting go, laying down, surrendering my agenda for today, for this week, for my life. It requires recognizing that satisfying my hunger or my tiredness is really not as important as I believe it to be. Now, this letting go is not a medieval denigration of the body and one’s legitimate needs, but it is a proper ordering of those needs, toning down the volume of my blaring concern for myself, in order to heed God’s whisper of how I might serve others. Persistently living in the Spirit, persistently surrendering to the flow of Christ within me, over time yields a rich and heavenly harvest, not only for the other people whom I’ve allowed Christ to touch through me, but also for me myself: over time, you and I will find that we are less addicted, less needy, more free, and more at peace.

But how, you might ask, can we practically cultivate such a life—one lived by the Spirit rather than the flesh? Let me underscore, firstly, that the suggestions I’m going to list are only scratching the surface of the possibilities. Definitely consider coming up with your own ideas, especially if you feel your heart drawn in a particular way not mentioned this morning. But, to hopefully spark some ideas, I’d recommend things like:

- Invest 5 minutes (or longer) at some point during the day to prayer and meditation. Some people prefer to do this first thing in the morning; for others, it works better to do so later in the day, like around lunchtime or before bed. Try a meditative prayer style like Centering Prayer or the Jesus Prayer. A couple books I’d recommend as guides for these kinds of prayer are Thomas Keating’s *Open Mind, Open Heart*, and Martin Laird’s *Into the Silent Land*. Or, if you try a meditative style of prayer, and it just really doesn’t fit you, then perhaps use something a little bit more active: pray the Lord’s Prayer, but slow down enough to really think through and reflect on each of the lines—each of the words—you’re saying.

- Another idea, which comes out of Jesuit spirituality, is to listen to a passage of the Bible being read, ideally a gospel story or a parable—some kind of narrative with characters and action. You can easily find many audio versions of such passages on YouTube, for example. Then close your eyes and imagine yourself as one of the characters in the story. Maybe you are in the boat with Jesus when the storm suddenly stirs up and you watch as Jesus calms the wind and waves. Maybe some days you will identify with Peter denying Jesus in his most vulnerable

hour, or with Mary Magdalene suddenly, unexpectedly discovering Jesus resurrected and alive and speechlessly trying to come to grips with how Jesus' resurrection has abruptly changed everything. Whichever passage you choose, listen to it repeatedly with your eyes closed, find the character that you are most drawn to, and then use your imagination to put yourself in the scene, in that character's sandals, to feel what the character feels—and then see how you and Jesus interact, and how God's Spirit encounters you through your interaction with Jesus in that story.

- One final idea: as you go throughout the day, set the timer on your phone or watch to buzz every 4-5 hours, something like at 8 am, 1 pm, and 6 pm. And when you get the buzz, stop what you are doing for 30 seconds, and pray a short prayer of surrender to the Spirit of God. For example, "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. I give to you my plans, needs, desires, and strength for the rest of this day. I ask you to quiet me, center me, fill me, and direct me, so that I live the rest of this day not by my strength but by your power, not by my plans but according to your wise and loving ways."

These are just three ideas. Definitely feel free to creatively come up with what works best for you based on how you spiritually are built. The three things I just mentioned work well for me because I'm naturally drawn to contemplative activities. But my goal is not to make us all a bunch of monks and nuns. If you find that hiking up a mountain, for example, rather than quietly meditating opens a door for you to God's Spirit, then by all means head out into the hills. And if you're not sure where you personally can best hear the Spirit, then please send me an email or come by the church for a chat; I would love to talk with you and explore some ideas.

As I conclude, life according to the Spirit and not by the flesh is a life of deepest peace, joy, and love. It involves daily sacrifice—as Jesus himself said, a daily taking up of one's cross and following him. But that daily sacrifice, that daily surrender, is a million times more satisfying than the self-centering gratification of the flesh, a lifestyle that ultimately breeds hopelessness. As Kristian reminded us in his homily last Sunday, St. Augustine in his Confessions famously describes our hearts' deepest desire when he writes, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Living according to the flesh condemns our hearts to a deep, terrible, and endless feeling of restlessness, never truly being satisfied, never truly knowing peace. But life in and by the Spirit of God finally satisfies that gnawing hunger, finally calms that profound inner turbulence. So this week, and beginning even today, I encourage each one of us to invite that Spirit in, to invite that Spirit to have control, and to enjoy the soul-satisfying rest of a Spirit-led life. Amen.