

Lectionary 15A  
Romans 8:1-11

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*<sup>1</sup>There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup>For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. <sup>3</sup>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, <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup>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, <sup>8</sup>and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

*<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>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.*

I hope you have noticed that during the summer months we are reading a series of passages from Paul's letter to the Romans – both here at worship and in the Church Begins at Home devotions that many of you use. Today we begin three Sundays in chapter 8, which is such a rich treasury of texts that I am going to devote my sermons to them over these next three weeks.

Let me begin by pointing out something that should be obvious to us if we think about it, but which often eludes us. This obvious “something” is that this writing of Paul is a letter addressed to a group of people.

Have any of us ever received an important letter, read the first paragraph or two, then set it aside for a week before reading the next two paragraphs, then again set it aside for yet another week before continuing on? I doubt it. When we receive a letter, unless we are interrupted for some reason, we read it straight through from beginning to end. So our piecemeal approach to reading this letter to the church at Rome is very much at odds with the nature of a letter.

Furthermore, in the almost 2000 years since Paul wrote this letter, there have been incredible advances in the way we correspond with one another. The first big advance took place during the lifetime of Martin Luther in the early 16th century when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. That made it possible to easily make multiple copies of a letter or treatise so that many people could read the information in a short period of time. No doubt Martin Luther's impact on the church would have been nowhere near what it was if it were not for printing presses sending his writings all over Europe.

In just the past generation there has been exponential advances in communication – just ask our kids if they have ever used carbon paper to make a copy of a report! Cell phones, email, Skype, and Facebook have revolutionized the way we disseminate information.

But when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, there was only one copy – a copy that was carried by some traveler from wherever Paul was to a group of Christians in the city of Rome. Maybe there were a few hundred people in the fledgling Christian community in Rome. They certainly didn't have a church building like this to gather in. More likely they met in someone's house. Imagine that when Paul's letter arrived, the news spread by word of mouth that the letter was going to be read that evening and maybe 40-50 people were able to gather together on short notice to hear what this Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles they had heard so much about, had to say.

We are accustomed to having a written text before us, but to appreciate how Paul writes his letter it is important to remember that the original audience would have heard it read -- and all in one sitting. Paul therefore had to provide ways in which listeners could follow what he was saying. One way he does this is by repeating his main points continuously – but he is able to avoid sounding repetitious by using different images or combinations of terms to say the same thing.

Paul starts out by contrasting being unrighteous or being righteous. Then he contrasts living under the law with living under grace. Next he contrasts living under bondage to sin with living under bondage to God. And now in our reading today he contrasts living according to the flesh with living according to the Spirit. Paul keeps introducing new terms, but in all of these contrasts he is describing the same reality. When we understand what he is doing, it may strike us as being unnecessary to be so repetitive, but when we remember the original context of this letter, we recognize that Paul is using a great writing technique for composing a letter that a group of people is going to listen to while someone reads it out loud.

This morning I'm going to explain how Paul uses the terms "flesh" and "spirit" in this passage, for these are terms that we may think we understand, when we are actually totally missing his point.

We who have grown up in Western civilization are influenced by the understanding of flesh and spirit taught by the Greek philosopher, Plato. Plato, who lived 500 years before Paul, believed that humans are a duality – an immortal spirit that for a time resides imprisoned in a body (flesh). That understanding easily leads to a moral dualism in which activities that give pleasure to the "flesh" are to be avoided or even considered sinful (for example, rich foods, wine, dancing, sex, certain types of art and music) and that people should aspire only to activities of the "spirit" (prayer, meditation, simplicity in all things).

Even though Paul visited Athens and was probably aware of Plato's teaching, this is not how he uses the terms flesh and spirit. Paul uses "flesh" and "spirit" not to describe two parts of a person, but two ways of living. When he speaks of someone living "according to the flesh" he is referring to the whole person living under the power of sin. It is a figure of speech -- much like if I were to ask someone to "count heads" here this morning -- what I really mean is I want to know how many entire people are here. Or if I say that a melody we will sing later was written by the hand of Beethoven, you realize that I'm saying that Beethoven in his entirety wrote the melody and not just his hand. So it is when Paul speaks of living according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. Paul is not describing two parts of a person, but two ways of living -- and it is the same contrast as living under the law or living under grace and the same contrast as living under bondage to sin or living under bondage to God.

"Life in the flesh" is essentially life carried on under the lordship of the sinful self. It is a life of self-idolatry. "Life in the Spirit", on the other hand, is life set free from bondage to self -- but this is not a total freedom. Since we are created beings, creatures, there is no such thing as total freedom for us. We necessarily are in bondage to some power that is greater than our selves. We have only two options. We can be in bondage to the power that Paul describes using the terms sin, self, law, or the old Adam -- or we can be in bondage to the power that Paul describes using the terms grace, Spirit, or the righteousness of God.

Following Paul's train of thought here, one might well expect him to next say that we have to make a choice -- we can choose to live according to the flesh or we can choose to live according to the Spirit. We are at a fork in the road -- which way are we going to choose to go?

Surprisingly, Paul does not call on us to make a choice, but to simply recognize that God has already made a choice. God has chosen to be righteous, to be faithful to his promises. In the last verse of our passage this morning, Paul writes: "If the Spirit of [God] who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you." That sentence begins with an "if" clause that is "according to fact". By that I mean that Paul is not asking us whether or not God's Spirit dwells in us. He is confident that God's Spirit does dwell in us. We might translate it this way: "If the Spirit of God dwells in you -- and the Spirit does dwell in you because God gave you the Spirit in your baptism into Christ -- then you can be confident that God who raised Jesus from the dead will one day resurrect your body from the dead also."

By once again recalling the resurrection, Paul teaches us a most important lesson. First, the Spirit does not belong to human beings. The Spirit is always God's Spirit, never a human possession. Second, God gives the Spirit. If even Jesus did not raise himself from the dead but was raised by the Spirit of God, then human beings cannot earn the Spirit. We cannot choose or obtain the Spirit. The Spirit is always and forever God's gift to us.

Let's take what Paul is saying here and apply it to repentance. To many people, repenting of our sin means saying to God, "I can do better." I'm sorry, God. I know I messed up, but I'm going to turn things around and I promise I'll do better.

That's not repentance. That's self-idolatry, living under the illusion that we are a god unto ourselves and that we're in control of our lives. To say "I can do better" is just another way of saying, "I can do it myself and I don't need you, God".

True repentance is saying, “I can’t.” God, I know that as much as I want to be in control of my life, I realize that I’m not in control of anything. I make up my lists of resolutions and they fall by the wayside. My relationships with others aren’t what they should be. I can’t even guarantee that I’ll be alive at this time tomorrow. I can’t do it myself, God, but I know you can, and so I repent and turn my life over to you. I live with the assurance of your promises and I bind myself to you.

Martin Luther captured Paul’s teaching well when he wrote the Small Catechism. In explaining the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed (“I believe in the Holy Spirit”), Luther writes “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith.”

I can’t – but God can, and has! Because of God’s promise effected in the death and resurrection of Jesus and given to us in baptism, Paul can say as a simple declaration of fact: “You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.”