

sermon-6/7/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Children of God”
Romans 8:12-17
By Jim Patten

Romans is perhaps the most important letter of all Paul’s letters in the Bible. He lays out the heart of what he believes in this letter of introduction to the Church in Rome. Chapter eight has stood out as a favorite part of this letter.

In our passage Paul makes it clear we are all debtors to something or someone. That is just a given. We must decide to whom we will be in debt. In this context, Paul says the choice is between the flesh or the Spirit.

He is not talking about our bodies when he uses the word flesh. Too many Christians down through the years have been uncomfortable and even distrustful of their bodies. It has led some to be uptight prudes. It has led others to ignore or deny their bodily needs. That seldom works. They just come out in inappropriate ways. The scandals involving pastors and priests are just one sad example of this. Scholars tell us we must not confuse the choice between flesh and Spirit here in Romans with the distinction between body and soul.

Flesh, for Paul, is all that keeps life from being what God intended it to be when we were created. It is all that distorts life, all that trivializes life, all that confuses unimportant aspects of life with what is ultimately important.

When Paul talks about the Spirit, he is talking about that intimate presence of God that prays for us as we stumble along with our own inarticulate prayers. It is the presence of God that reminds us we are all children of God.

As some of you know by now, I am all for inclusive language when it comes to scripture and the liturgy. I am glad when the NRSV changes phrases like “sons of God” with “children of God.” That is what happened in our text. The Greek is more literally translated, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” “Sons” here is supposed to mean both men and women. That is troublesome to those of us who are concerned about inclusive language.

However, it is important to know what Paul intended when he calls us all, men and women, sons of God. He is using the same word he would use in calling Jesus the son of God. Paul is elevating our status to a very high level when we are led by the Spirit. We become a sibling of Jesus! Jesus’ intimate relationship with God is a possibility for each one of us. And not only are we siblings with Jesus, we are also heirs with him of all that God promises. That is pretty astounding!

Of course, the trouble is we don’t live in such a black and white world. As one commentator noted, we don’t make neat and clean choices between being a debtor to the flesh and a debtor to the Spirit. We tend to live between the two commitments.

Depending on the day or the time of any particular day, our actions and thoughts betray our ambivalence. Sometimes it feels like too big a sacrifice to go where the Spirit of God is leading. Sometimes, if truth be told, the flesh looks a whole lot more interesting, or at least pleasurable than the Spirit.

That same commentator said this ambivalence, this living between these two commitments, may be part of why we suffer. He writes, “the tension of living in the flesh and yet longing for the Spirit of God” can cause us all kinds of suffering.

It would only take a little bit of introspection for most of us to recognize this situation in our own lives. It is so easy to forget, or ignore the spiritual side of life. We have so many demands and concerns on our plate, from the trivial to the very important. Did I remember to pay my IRS quarterly payment? When does my car license need to be renewed? Will my pension be there when I retire? Should I tell my doctor about that pain I’ve been experiencing? Will my children make good decisions or suffer from bad ones? How can I nurture my aging parents and still keep up with my own work requirements and have a life of my own? There are so many concerns!

Herb O’Driscoll says if we decide the self is all that exists, if my own little life with its troubles and successes is all there is, then we can very easily be enslaved by the demands of self. It just takes over. That is what Paul means by a spirit of slavery. We are slaves to the flesh and it leads to fear. And when we are afraid, we make terrible choices. It snowballs and we become more enslaved.

He says when we realize there is more than just my little world, when we cease to act as if we are the center of the universe, when we choose to be led by the Spirit of God, we begin to experience the joy and the freedom of adopted children of God.

Another commentator says if we take seriously the adoptive status that comes with our baptisms, then “lives of sin and anxiety ill befit (us).” That is what Paul is getting at in this chapter. He is asking the Christians at Rome if they have the courage to let God be their parent.

It takes courage, because, as anyone who has seriously tried to be led by the Spirit knows, suffering is part of the package. Some have pointed out that, like Jesus, when we have an intimate relationship with God and God’s grace, that relationship can be costly. One describes that suffering as coming from the “self-giving love in service to others” being a true disciple of Jesus encourages. Anyone who has ever loved another deeply knows that love can be wonderful, but it can be extremely costly.

This is Trinity Sunday. It is the Sunday where many preachers talk about the mystery of the Trinity. This passage in Romans was chosen by the lectionary folks because it mentions God, Jesus, and the Spirit. I, obviously, chose not to enter into a deep theological meditation on the Trinity. Truth be told, I get lost when I enter that conversation.

Instead, we focused on what it means to be children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, and led by the Spirit. But, I will leave you with just one little trinitarian idea to ponder on this Trinity Sunday. It comes from Meister Eckhart, a 13th century mystic. This is what he wrote: “Do you want to know what goes on in the heart of the Trinity? I’ll tell you. At the heart of the Trinity the Father laughs, and gives birth to the Son. The Son then laughs back at the Father, and gives birth to the Spirit. Then the whole Trinity laughs, and gives birth to us.”

It is strangely comforting to me to think of the triune God looking down at us humans and finding it very funny. It helps me take myself less seriously. May that laughter bubble up in your lives as you attempt to be led by the Spirit. Amen