Jim's Sermon – July 23, 2023

As you may have noticed, I usually avoid preaching about Paul, and especially Romans which, as you know, after hearing passages from this Letter over the past few weeks, is not the most easily understandable book in the Bible.

But the Letter to the Romans provides the basis for how the church understands sin, redemption, grace and forgiveness, and these are all things that are very important to us. So, let me offer a few ideas that might hopefully provide some ways to understand what Paul is getting at.

First of all, it might be helpful to understand the questions that Paul is seeking to answer in this letter, such as: How should the new Christian movement relate to its Jewish roots? How can one be a Christian without first being a Jew? And, if God established his covenant with Israel by giving them the Law as the way to God, how can it be that Christians are not required to follow that same, divinely established law (with its requirements to eat only kosher, food, for men to be circumcised, etc)? These were important and challenging questions for the early Christian community.

Paul's main mission was to find a way for the early Church to retain its Jewish roots while not being confined by the Law of Moses, to extend membership in the church to gentiles, those who are not members of God's chosen people, those whom Paul describes as God's *adopted* children.

He also wanted to explain how redemption works. If Jesus redeemed creation by his death and resurrection, why does evil continue to abound? Why, as Paul confessed, does he continue to do the things he doesn't want to do and not do the things he wants to do?

For an answer Paul turned to Greek philosophy, particularly Plato, who saw the human person as having two natures, the immortal soul, (which includes the mind), and the mortal body, whose only purpose is to provide a vessel for the soul.

Paul takes this dualistic view of the person and coins the term the flesh and the spirit. The spirit being that which is eternal and connected to the divine and is beyond sin and corruption; and the flesh being that which is mortal and physical and which makes us vulnerable to acting in ways that are harmful to ourselves and others.

Paul uses this dual way of looking at human nature to explain why the law still has significance. We need the law, he says, to rule the flesh, because we are flesh. But we are also spirit, and the spirit is ruled by Christ. The more we dwell in the spirit, Paul says, the less we need the law.

We experience this in our own lives. For instance, if we always drive according to the rules, staying under the speed limit, and on our side of the yellow line, then the laws governing the road become unimportant to us. We don't drive carefully to avoid a fine, we drive carefully because we are oriented that way. We *want* to be good drivers.

If we drive recklessly, we will be thinking not about being good drivers, but about not getting caught. Then we are governed by the laws that are in place for bad drivers. It is not just a difference of behaviour, but of attitude and orientation.

To use a more extreme example, most of us don't know about or care about anti-racketeering laws designed to prosecute gangsters. These laws are not for us. They are for criminals.

Since we all occasionally fail to live according to the spirit, the law remains there to guide us. But the law, the guide to proper living, is not enough *in itself* to cause us to live properly. Laws can constrain people not to do wrong, but that does not necessarily lead us to life in the spirit. Paul says it dramatically: the law on its own leads to death, while only the spirit can leads us to life.

Being a realist, Paul knew himself that we all dwell somewhere between the spirit and the flesh. There is no escaping the flesh, the body, the ego.

While there is a divine spirit in us that is redeemed, our flesh is not, at least not yet. Paul invites us to participate in the redemption of the world by embracing the endless battle that rages in us between living in harmony with the spirit and the tendency of our flesh to behave in unhealthy ways.

The passage that struck me in last week's reading from Romans is the phrase, "those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit".

I believe that Paul means by this that the flesh and the spirit are not things as we think of things, not good and bad, but they are two realms that are not yet harmonized, they represent where we are and where we need to go. The notion of flesh and spirit is about where we focus our consciousness, where we put our attention (where we set our minds).

We are not pre-programmed robots; we are free to chose to orient ourselves to the spirit rather than the flesh, however (and this is important) we can only do so with God's grace.

The death and resurrection of Jesus didn't end the struggle between the spirit and the flesh, (what we might call the forces of light and darkness), rather it set the world on a course toward the ultimate victory of love over hate.

In the parable of the weeds and the wheat, Jesus is also being a realist. There is good and evil in the world and in us. It is a delusion to believe that we can rip out the weeds in ourselves, the weeds are an inescapable part of being human. And if we fail to acknowledge the weeds in our lives, we risk loosing touch with what it means to be a human. We can become self-righteous. If we fool ourselves into thinking that we can eliminate sin from our lives by our own efforts, if we fail to acknowledge and accept what some psychologists call our shadow, our weaknesses, desires, instincts, and shortcomings, we risk becoming disconnected from ourselves.

And it isn't always clear what is a weed and what isn't. As someone once said, "weeds are just plants in places where we don't want them to be." We can't know what might be helpful to us in our journey. While we do know what is the right thing to do in most situations, only God, who can determine what are the weeds and what is the wheat.

Of course we have a role to play, and the readings from Romans and Matthew might be seen as encouragement for us to embrace the struggle between the flesh and the spirit because it is our way to redemption.

This struggle within us to choose good and reject evil is the work that will lead to the completion of the redemptive work of Jesus, the sanctification and divinization of all creation, for which creation yearns, as Paul says.

But this work requires us to seek God's guidance, through prayer and reflection, and to be patient, understanding and forgiving of ourselves and others.

We know we will make mistakes and do harmful things for strictly selfish purposes. Our liturgy offers numerous opportunities to acknowledge our failings and ask forgiveness.

But we do this not out of fear of God's wrath, but in acknowledgement of God's compassion, and as a reminder to us to continue to open ourselves to that

compassion; as an acknowledgement that we cannot become divine without the divine, that we cannot take on the mind of Christ without Christ, that we cannot become filled with the spirit without the spirit. That we cannot love without connection to the source of all love.

Paul is not saying that the flesh is evil. The flesh is what ties us to the earth and to our physical selves. The flesh is how we experience the world. It is because Jesus became flesh that we are able to know God as we do. The promise is that if we stay connected to the Spirit, in the end not just our fleshy bodies, but all creation will be redeemed, everything will become filled with divine light and love.

The only thing that is preventing that from happening right now is our own weakness. But it is a weakness that is part of being human, a weakness that comes from our free will. Without this freedom we would not sin, but we also would not be able to relate to one another, we would not be able to love, we would not be able to engage in the ongoing work of redemption.

In the end, Paul in his ingenious way *uses* the Greek notion of a dual human nature, (that we are made of a distinct and separate body and soul), but he brings it back to the teaching of Jesus that we are not separate into good and bad natures, but that we are one--unities of body, mind and spirit; that our flesh is not just an empty vessel, but is that part of us waiting to be fully redeemed, to be brought into God's light and love.

Our own struggle to live in the spirit is our way of participating in the redemption of the physical universe. When we chose to live in the spirit, trusting in God's mercy and forgiveness, setting our minds on God, manifesting the divine spirit of that is in each of us, then the only law that remains important is the law of love. We live no longer in fear of God's retribution, but rather, as Paul writes, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

The Letter to the Romans, then, is Paul's explanation of how all people, even we gentiles, are invited into the kingdom of God, and into the struggle to bring that kingdom into fruition. It is a message of hope and a challenge to us to orient our lives to the spirit.

And so we gather here on Sunday morning to do precisely this, to come together, we who are both flesh and spirit, to see and feel and touch the divine in this ancient liturgy; to feel a yearning for the birth of God's kingdom on earth, to be renewed

by grace in our endless struggle to bring Christ into our lives and into the world, to taste the ultimate victory of God's love that will gather all people into that city where the saints will dwell in light.