

## Life in the Spirit

### Romans 8:6-11

<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.

We continue in the season of Lent in the church year. Lent is traditionally a time for Christians to focus on the problem of sin and to engage in fasting and repentance in preparation for Easter. That is why the Gospel stories of the temptation of Jesus are usually the Bible readings for the First Sunday in Lent: there we see how Jesus faced temptation and persevered, and ask how we might persevere in our own times of trial. We have also learned through this season that no matter who we are (age, gender, education, religious upbringing, ethnicity, nationally, rank in our family...) we can be blessed and be a blessing to others. This Epistle lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent focuses on the obstacles to our doing God's will and the way that the Holy Spirit gracefully empowers us to please God. **Susan R. Garrett**

The Christian life is a material life. "Setting our mind on the Spirit" (v. 6) is not about an attempt to put our bodies to the side somehow and concentrate on the inner life of faith. Paul's contrast between Spirit and flesh in this passage is not to be understood as a contrast between soul and body or between spirituality and sensuality. Life "in the Spirit" refers, among other things, to a way of conducting a bodily life: it is manifested in how we use our physical energies and our material resources, how we care for our neighbors and for our planet. When "the Spirit of

God dwells in [us]" (v. 9), our lives together, in all its concreteness and messiness, become expressions and instruments of God's grace and peace.

"The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God" (v. 7). For Paul, "the mind that is set on the flesh" is synonymous with sin, which turns away from grateful dependence on God. The fleshly mind-set attempts to live in denial of God's creating and sustaining grace, instead seeking life and meaning in our own desires and accomplishments. It is a form of idolatry, setting ourselves up as lords of our own lives. **Amy Plantinga Pauw**

To "set the mind on the flesh" does not mean to focus obsessively on sex, as some suppose, but to live a life in which one routinely succumbs to the push and pull of *any* of the sinful passions and desires. These include, for example, anger and hatred, and a lust for wealth, prestige, power, or approval (see also Gal. 5:19-21). Life governed by such passions is life lived in obedience to sin, and it issues in death (see Rom. 6:23). In verses 7-8 Paul elaborates on this bondage suffered by all who live in the flesh. Such persons cannot possibly please God, because their first allegiance is to their own passions and desires, which never incline to the purposes of God. **Susan R. Garrett**

Ironically, "the mind that is set on the flesh" can sometimes produce a life of upstanding morality and outward virtue. As David Kelsey has argued, "living in trust that our lives are justified by what we do in accord with standards of excellence lies at the very heart of sin. What we do sinfully need not even be immoral; even if what we do is morally good, it is sin if we trust the doing of it to show that our lives are worth living." Boasting about our virtue can be a sign of our failure to submit to "the law of the Spirit" (8:2, 7). The person who prides herself or himself on what they are giving up for Lent may be exhibiting the fleshly mind-set, living in hostility to God's free grace.

We enjoy "the new life of the Spirit" (7:6) only because of our union with the crucified and risen Christ. Paul's appeal to Habakkuk 2:4, "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (1:17), applies first of all to Jesus Christ. On the cross, Christ was faithful to the end, giving up any claim to life and righteousness apart from God's gift. In the resurrection, God raised him to new life, upholding his obedience and breaking the hold that death had on him, so that "the life [Christ] lives, he lives to God" (6:10). Now, by grace, "the Spirit of [the same God] who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in [us]" (8:11), uniting us with Christ and bestowing on us the righteousness and hope that come from faith. Because we are in Christ, we have been transferred from the fleshly domain of death and sin to the Spirit's domain of "life and peace" (v. 6).

Life in the Spirit is communal life. This week our Regional Minister, Rev. James, sent out an article that had been shared by Rev. Linda Farley, pastor of First Christian Church of Adrian. The article talked about how to faithfully minister to families who have lost loved ones in this time of COVID-19 and the need for social distancing. From the article and after reading again Governor Whitmer's executive order I discovered that faith communities can gather for worship during this pandemic. We are exempt from the executive order! But we live in community...what affects one affects all...so if some are asked to practice social distancing...our congregation will practice social distancing...we will not put others or ourselves in close social contact, possibly endangering the lives of others.

The Spirit facilitates the character of Christ, so that the hallmark of the Spirit's presence in our lives is love: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (5:5). The Spirit dwelling in the community binds believers to God and to each other in loving union. We "walk according to the Spirit" (8:4) when we live together in mutual affection as members of Christ's body, receiving from each other's hands the gifts that God

intends for us (12:4-12). Grateful acknowledgment of our dependence on each other is a mirror of our identity as children of God and joint heirs with Christ (8:17).

Through the Spirit, we already participate in the power of Christ's resurrection—our bodies, which were "dead because of sin" (v. 10) have become means of grace, connection, and joy. God's promise to "give life to [our] mortal bodies" (v. 11) will be consummated when our bodies too are raised to be with Christ. In this season of Lent our identity through the Spirit is both a gift and a task. It is a gift because Christ is indeed risen, and his resurrection power is already made manifold through the Spirit's life-giving presence in our midst. Our identity is also a task, in that we are still subject to suffering and frustration as we wait in hope for our final redemption (8:18-24). Lent then is a time of affirming that our life according to the flesh is dead, and that new life and peace are available even now through the Spirit of Christ.

We live through Lent as those who know they are headed for glory, not because of our own spiritual accomplishments, but because the Spirit has bound us up with the glorified Christ, who is "the firstborn within a large family" (8:29). **Amy**

**Plantinga Pauw**

Our prayer for you is that you will live in the Spirit now and always!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.