

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Peace w/ Justice Sunday

Scripture: Romans 8:1-17 (12-17)

May 30th, 2021

Last week, on Pentecost Sunday, we asked two questions, "How are we restored by God? How do we restore one another through the Spirit of God?" We looked at the story of Pentecost and saw the mighty power of the Holy Spirit descending down on the people to guide them, as Jesus had promised, to begin setting the foundations for the early church. This week our question is prompted by Paul instead of Peter as we look at Romans 8. Paul's question for today in this excerpt of his Letter to the Romans, which is What is life in the Spirit? Last week when Peter asked his questions, he quoted Joel, and like Peter, Paul will be quoting from the Hebrew Bible, specifically the Book of Deuteronomy, in order to make the case that his community has new life in Christ to proclaim the gospel to the poor and the oppressed.

This is also Trinity Sunday where in the United Methodist Church we celebrate all aspects of the Godhead, three in one, each carrying out their specific task in the continual process of God's creation. This is also Peace with Justice Sunday in the United Methodist Church where we celebrate our gifts and offerings that go to fund our restorative justice efforts across the denomination. In light of both of these special Sundays, I want us to frame Paul's question today from the perspective of building relationships. This is what Paul will seek to today throughout his ministry of building the church and this theme of building relationships is not only the foundation on which the early church is built, but building relationships is the essence of the gospel message. Let us look to Romans 8 to hear how Paul wrestles with this question, what is life in the Spirit?

Romans 8:1-4 *So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³ God has done what was impossible for the Law, since it was weak because of selfishness. God condemned sin in the body by sending his own Son to deal with sin in the same body as humans, who are controlled by sin. ⁴ He did this so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us. Now the way we live is based on the Spirit, not based on selfishness.*

In the opening two verses of Paul's case for the Spirit, he uses the phrase, "in Christ," in both verses 1 and 2 which means Paul understands Jesus is the foundation for this newfound life. Paul's new life in Christ means we have a fresh new perspective in which to see the world from, and if we are to fully embrace this new perspective, Paul understands this must be rooted in the gospel message of Jesus. Paul also uses the phrase law of the Spirit. When the Spirit is mentioned in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible before and during Jesus' time, the Spirit always indicates Divine intervention. Think of Jesus' baptism when the Spirit of the Lord descends and blesses Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Think of the Spirit in the Genesis story, also called breath, where humankind does not receive life until God breathes the Spirit into the body of the *Adama (Adam)*. Thus, the Spirit in Christ is a spirit which breathes new life into the community of the early church, blessing them to proclaim the good news to all who will listen. Remember, Jesus did not come to earth to start a new religion, but Jesus came to restore new life in the traditions of Judaism to help bring relevance, purpose, and wholeness to the lives of the Jewish people. With the Spirit in Christ, we are called to a new life of serving others through serving God.

Paul also wrestles with the idea of sin in this passage. What is sin according to Paul here? Sin is largely understood as something that disconnects us from God, and Paul takes it further and describes sin here in this passage as an abuse of power over others. Sin had the power over us by reminding us of our constant mortality and limitations of our short lives, but Jesus casts out sin so we do not have to worry about the cares of tomorrow. Instead, we can focus on serving others because we know we have been set free from the captivity in which death and the idea of death can trap us. Sin is not shame or guilt for the bad things we have done in our lives, but sin is an abuse of holding power over one another (HarperCollins 1151). The way Paul understands us sinning against one another is through our selfishness.

Romans 8:5-8 ⁵ *People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit.* ⁶ *The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace.* ⁷ *So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't.* ⁸ *People who are self-centered aren't able to please God.*

Selfishness should be antithetical to the gospel message of Jesus Christ, even though, as we all know, there are no doubt people in this world

who prop up the gospel using it as a photo op or a way to deliver a heartfelt message, only with the intention to better themselves as they pull at the heartstrings of genuine people. Selfishness goes against everything the gospel teaches us is fruitful because selfishness comes from our own ambitions not from God. Remember Paul continuously calls us to think about each other as he uses the phrase "our father" over fifty times in all of his letters, but he only uses the word "my father" once. Paul is just taking notes from Jesus' work though. We do not begin the Lord's Prayer with, "God is my father," but it begins, "Our Father." The gospel is constantly calling us to be in relationship with one another. The Holy Spirit connects each of us together reminding us of the new life breathed into each of us.

Romans 8:9-11 ⁹ *But you aren't self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, they don't belong to him.* ¹⁰ *If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin.* ¹¹ *If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.*

This is the core the of Paul's argument. To be in Christ, you must learn to think not for yourself but for others. It is important to note here this is not about perfection, nor is it about feeling guilt or shame when we fall short. We will all sin and we have all been selfish, but the point Paul is trying to make is our selfishness is an abuse of the power the gospel gives us to help in restoring the world by building the kingdom of God. Paul breaks down his argument by calling us to build relationships and understand the liberation of the gospel.

Paul understands the power of sin is this unilateral type of power with only one motive, one direction, and one vision for achieving this goal. Dr. Robert Mesle in his book *Process-Relational Philosophy* defines power, "as the ability to affect others without being affected by them" (Mesle p 65). This type of power is controlling and authoritarian; this top-down power structure which attempts to hold on to all the power it holds without giving anyone else agency by determining the rules and regulations. When you hear people leaving the church or being frustrated with society, most often, they are referencing unilateral power. Unilateral power without any checks and balances leads us to fear, disconnection from others, and seclusion for self-preservation.

Jesus calls us to hold the space with a different type of power called relational power. Mesle defines this as, "the ability to be actively open to and

affected by the world around us; the ability to create ourselves out of what we have taken in; and the ability to influence those around us by having first been affected by them" (Mesle p 73). Does this not sound like the work of the gospel? Listening to one another, co-creating our the Kingdom of God, healing together in our brokenness...aren't these all aspects of what the work of the gospel looks like? Mesle goes on to say, "relational power is like love. The more we love each other, the more both of us can grow" (Mesle 75). If God is love, then the power of the gospel that we are called to spread to the world must always be rooted in the power of love and the power of the life giving Spirit Jesus promised us would come following his death and resurrection.

Romans 8:12-17 ¹² *So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. ¹³ If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. ¹⁵ You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. ¹⁷ But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.*

In Paul's closing arguments, Paul makes it clear that selfishness is not a part of the gospel message, nor can it be a part of the work of the gospel. New life in Christ and new life given to us by the Holy Spirit must mean we serve others, think about the needs of others, work to build an equitable world for others, and do all this in the name of love because our God loved us. Our fears and failures will always try and tell us otherwise, and I have no doubt at some point in your life that fear will consume you and you will fall short. The promise of new life in Christ demands us not to dwell on moments such as this and when we do to lean on each other for encouragement, support, care, and love. Paul doesn't leave us with a bleak, doomsday scenario, but he says, "The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children" You are enough, just the way you are. Now go tell that on a mountain top and shout it from the rooftops, Love is the answer!

In closing, if the Spirit is to move us and shake us as it did last week on Pentecost Sunday, then where are we being poked and prodded to go this week? Will we be moved by the Spirit as our siblings in Christ go hungry in the streets of our country? Will we be moved by the Spirit to acknowledge

healthcare is a human right as we faced the largest pandemic of the 21st century? Will we be moved to see the humanity in the faces of the 67 children who were killed in Palestinian this past month? Will we be moved by the Spirit to not see just an immigrant or a refugee, but instead see a human being with dreams, goals, loves, passions, skills, and maybe even the capacity to love better than us? Where will the Spirit lead us Easter people and where will the winds of the Spirit send us to Pentecostal Church? Let us remember that God so loved the world that God sent Jesus not condemn the world or destroy the world for its evil doings, but Jesus was sent out of love and Jesus was sent to restore and heal the world to bring about the Kingdom of God which gives power to each of us to proclaim the good news that God is Love. Send us now, Holy Spirit, in your peace, your grace, and your justice to bring about our healing and wholeness. Amen.