

▣ Lectionary thoughts

Romans 8:1-11 Life in the Spirit

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 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, 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. 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. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 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, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

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. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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.

in the spirit of things

traditional funeral passage

What does it mean to have this kind of life in the face of suffering and death

Romans

Romans is the first epistle in the New Testament, although not the first to be written. Paul wrote it to the church at Rome, which included both Jews and Gentiles. His primary theme is the basics of the good news of Christ, salvation for all people. The book was probably written in 57 AD, when Paul was near the end of his third missionary journey around the Eastern Mediterranean. It is unusual in that it was written to a church that Paul had not visited.

Romans 8:1-11

Paul has written of the inner conflict which arises within the believer. Whether an adherent to the Law or a Christian, one wills to follow God's ways, but somehow one does otherwise. Something within one causes one not to follow through from "mind" (v. 6) to action. One's body, one's "flesh", seems naturally inclined to do evil. Paul has thanked God for rescuing us from this state: for we who are incorporated "in Christ Jesus" (v. 1) there are no dire consequences ("condemnation") of our mistakes. Why? Because God's "Spirit" (v. 2), in the new way of being, has freed us from the finality of physical death. God has overcome our inclination to sin by lovingly "sending his own Son" (v. 3): he who suffered the effects of human sin in order to do away with it through rising again, thus enabling us to attain oneness with God (v. 4).

There are two *mindsets* (vv. 5-6): one self-oriented and the other Spirit-oriented, one leading to the finality of "death", and one to spiritual "life". Self-orientation is inherently in opposition to

God (v. [7](#)). But Christians are motivated by the Spirit (dwells", v. [9](#)), belong to God. "Spirit" and "Christ" come together. Vv. [10-11](#) say: if Christ (or the Spirit) is in you, though you may be a corpse because of all the wrong you have done, you are actually very much alive – because of the Spirit. If God's Spirit is in you, God will resuscitate your bodies (from being corpses) through the Spirit, in raising you to new life at the end of time.

Romans 8:1-11

Commentary on Second Reading by [Marion L. Soards](#)

The transition between chapters 7 and 8 presents interpreters with a challenge, namely, to know exactly where one of Paul's thoughts leaves off and another of his thoughts begins.

Moreover, one is left wondering how Paul's thoughts relate to each other. The lectionary recognizes this difficulty and presents one solution by ending the reading *Pentecost 8, Year A* with Rom 7:25a and, then, beginning the reading *Pentecost 9, Year A* with Rom 8:1. In this approach, however, Rom 7:25b gets left out of the reading altogether. While not attempting to solve the matter here (it is a point that merits/requires extensive reflection), one should at least be aware that Rom 8:1-11 is not "context-less." This passage follows (closely) on the heels of the text of last week's lesson.

Romans 8:1-2 form a thesis statement that is explained in 8:3-8; then, 8:9-11 present a further explanatory statement that contrasts the situation laid out in vv. 7-8. Noticing and reflecting on this structure goes a long way toward (1) understanding this demanding passage of Romans, and (2) discerning an outline or method for re-presenting the text in preaching.

Just as in Rom 7:25b there is a pointed contrast made between "mind" and "flesh," so all through 8:1-11 there are a series of dramatic dissimilarities sketched out by Paul:

- law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus/law of sin and of death;
- law "weakened by flesh"/Son sent to deal with sin;
- flesh/Spirit;
- death/life and peace;
- in the flesh/in the Spirit;
- according to the flesh/according to the Spirit;
- sin/righteousness.

Interpreters sometimes refer to these pairs of ideas or entities as "antinomies," thus recognizing that Paul's view of the world brought him to identify pairs of opposites that together composed reality, as Paul understood it. In essence these pairings are typical of an apocalyptic eschatological outlook wherein there is an ultimate contrast between opposing forces: good and evil, darkness and light, etc. Paul's contrasts fit into this kind of "apocalyptic" thinking.

Thus, as Paul recognizes these opposites, so too the preacher can recognize and speak about the opposing forces that challenge our existence today. Here, it is helpful to note that Paul's language of "the flesh" can essentially be taken up in language related to "a human point of view." In fact, some contemporary translations render Paul's talk of the flesh with phrases like "a human perspective" or "a human point of view" or "human nature." In the places where Paul juxtaposes flesh to Spirit or mind, this "translation" is helpful (though there are other contexts in Paul's letters where "flesh" merely means a part of the human body—discerning the differences can sometimes be tricky).

One of Paul's pairs of contrasts in particular needs attention. In v. 3 Paul juxtaposes "the law, weakened by the flesh" with God's own Son, sent in the likeness of sinful flesh, to deal with sin. Here Paul presents

- the law as unable to bring about the salvation of humankind on the one hand, and
- God's own attainment of salvation for humanity by sending the Son on the other hand.

The idea of a "saving sending" was one of the ways that ancient Judaism thought and taught about the law and wisdom, as God's own gifts to humanity meant to accomplish the salvation of humanity, particularly the children of Abraham. Paul seems to have picked up this pattern of thought and to have used it to express his (and other early Christians') conviction that God had acted in sending Jesus Christ to do for humanity what humanity cannot do for itself. According to Paul, as God sent Jesus Christ, God accomplished what the law itself could not achieve. Human effort ("flesh") could not combine with the law (holy and just and good as it was/is) and win a right standing with God, for humanity was hopelessly in bondage to sin. In sending the Son, God defeated sin and freed humanity to live freely "according to the Spirit," i.e., under the gracious leadership of the Spirit.

Ultimately, in vv. 9-11 Paul presents his concerns in a predominantly positive way. He states who Christians are—they/we are in the Spirit and the Spirit is in them/us. This condition is the distinguishing characteristic of Christian life. Paul brings this emphasis for a purpose: With all the foregoing talk about the Christians' setting their minds on the Spirit rather than the flesh, it might be easy for Paul's reader to conclude that salvation itself is nothing more than making the right decisions in life. Yet, while we do have the responsibility to focus our lives on and in relation to God, the good news of the Gospel is that not only are we called to be "in the Spirit," but also the gracious gift of God to us is that the Spirit of God dwells in us. The paradox of Christian faith is that gift and demand go hand in hand: What God demands of us is what God has already given to us, namely, that we abide in the Spirit who indeed abides within us. There are both external and

internal dimensions of the experience of grace that take shape as we abide in the Spirit and the Spirit abides in us. Indeed, in the final verses of this week's lesson, we encounter a collection of Paul's phrases along these very lines that sometimes confuse as much as they clarify: "in the Spirit"; "the Spirit of God dwells in you"; "the Spirit of Christ"; "Christ is in you"; "the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead is in you . . . his Spirit that dwells in you." The language smacks of a kind of proto-Trinitarian thought, but without articulating a doctrine of the Trinity. What is clear, however, is that God has brought about an intimate relationship between the divine and the human that had never existed before and that exists now only as a result of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:1-11 – Paul seems almost obsessed by the “sins of the flesh,” which makes me wonder sometimes what was going on in his mind. But it’s probably not useful to focus on that. Paul’s central theme seems to be, that what we could not do for ourselves, Jesus Christ has done for us. Paul seems to be saying two things. We can’t do it by ourselves. That’s a significant reminder to those that believe that by acts of purification (in first century culture) or by harder work or further study (in our culture) we can achieve our own salvation. Secondly, God has already done it. Through Jesus. Never mind how! Just accept that God has done it for you. If God can raise Jesus from the dead, God can also raise us from the deadness of our lives.

Paul's Letter could be (and certainly has been) the basis of a sermon on its own – maybe even with the title “When anyone is joined to Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). Paul does not use the word “flesh” exclusively (or even primarily) to mean our physical bodies but rather an orientation to our world which is dominated by rebellion and sin. To break that orientation, that domination, it is necessary to be freed by God's Spirit, working through Jesus, thus allowing a new world to be born and a new life to be possible. One might, therefore, explore the freedom obtained through Jesus to stop brooding on the past and turn attention to the present life and its opportunities for good. Or one might explore that the transformation wrought by the Spirit is not just a personal transformation but is also the transformation of our orientation to the world and a sharing in the life-giving power at work in the community of God's people.

What does it mean to set the mind on the Spirit? What does that look like in our lives? Paul writes that to set the mind on the Spirit means life and peace. To set the mind on the flesh is a hostile act toward God.

“Hostile act.” Paul's harsh words challenge us to examine our lives. Do we feel like the sower of the seeds who works hard at choosing what is right and good, planting good seed only to discover that the rocks and weeds and birds work against him/her? What works against keeping our minds set on the Spirit? What in the society around us blocks the growth? What choices in our own lives keep us focused on the flesh rather than the Spirit?

Hymns: 420 Breathe on Me , Breath of God

707 Hymn of Promise

732 Come We That Love the Lord (or 733 Marching to Zion)

57 O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing