

Spirit Bearing Witness to Spirit Romans 8:12-17

Trinity Sunday/ 30th May 2021

Last week, on Pentecost, I referred to the Holy Spirit as [this incredibly benevolent force](#) moving and shaping the church. I would like to keep our attention on the Holy Spirit today, but pivot to the personal. Yes, the Spirit is in the church and in the world enabling us to continue and extend the mission of God. Scripture also testifies that the Spirit is personal, abiding deep within us, closer than our breath. The Spirit of Christ is at work within us, relating to us as person-to-person, relating to the core of who we are, the totality of who we are, the parts that are conscious as well as all that is unconscious. It's a relationship of the depths. And when we're attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the depths of our spirits, when we care for and cultivate this primary relationship, we realize that this, too, is part of the mission of God. We grow and are changed. The life of this relationship in Christ, in the Spirit, shapes the kinds of growth and change and transformations we long for in the church and in the world.

The lectionary reading for today starts at 8:12, but we need to hear what Paul says in the previous verse: "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 the Spirit that dwells in you." Paul knew that the Spirit of God dwells within us and that this same Spirit is active.

Romans 8:12-17 tells us something about the way Paul understood the nature of this dynamic relationship within us. Let's stay close to the text. And, so, first a word about the opening verses of the text, where Paul talks about being "debtors of the flesh" and putting to death the "deeds of the body." This might sound confusing, unsettling, if not Puritanical. When Paul refers to "flesh," here and elsewhere, he is not talking about our physical bodies. "Flesh" is his term for our natural existence, or human existence apart from God, fallen, broken human nature. "Flesh" is human existence divorced from God. That's what it means to be "of the flesh." Flesh is placed in sharp contrast with Spirit, because the Spirit is the one that takes our natural, sin-bound lives alienated from God and turns us around, transforms us into something new, into lives that participate in the Spirit of Christ. When this happens, we are being "led by the Spirit of God;" when we are being led by this Spirit, we come to know that we are God's children. And that's the point, that's the gospel. The Christian life consists of that life-long process or journey of coming to see ourselves (and others) as God's beloved children, it's about the development, change, and transformation from one way of being to another; it's about conversion—not once, but again and again as the Spirit pulls us into the life of God.

Paul continues, "For you did not receive [from Christ] a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption" (Ro. 8:15). That is, in Christ we have been, and we are—and are being—grafted into the life of God, adopted by God and called into God's life. This is because, as the cross and resurrection made abundantly clear, God desires to be close to us and, if we're honest, our heart's deepest desire is to be close to God too. This precious connection, this profound relationship between God and humanity and humanity and God stands at the heart of the gospel—it *is* the gospel—and remains at the core of the Christian life in all its richness and fullness as we live out the full, far-reaching dimensions of this primary relationship.

And Paul trusts in the eternal strength of this relationship and knew, as he said in the soaring culmination of this chapter in Romans, “For I am convinced...that neither death, nor life, nor angels, ...nor powers, nor height, or depth, nor anything in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).”

It’s the connection, the relationship that matters most. Knowing in Christ that we are very close to God we are able to cry out, “Abba! Father!” *Abba*, an Aramaic word, means something like, “Daddy.” It’s a term of endearment, of intimacy—so intimate in fact that our human spirits are free to cry out to the Spirit of God. Indeed, as Paul suggests, it’s the Spirit who allows us to become like children again in the presence of God, free to cry out when we are sad or anxious or afraid, free to trust and lean on God’s love, and free to praise God. That’s what the Holy Spirit does.

Last week we heard about a violent, rushing winds of the Spirit (Acts 2:2). We talked about the Holy Spirit as a force. It’s a metaphor, of course, and all metaphors are inadequate, and all metaphors break down. One of the weaknesses of the wind metaphor for the Holy Spirit is that it’s far too impersonal. We need to remember that the force is *benevolent* and that it belongs to someone. When both Jesus and Paul talk about the Holy Spirit, they describe a person, with characteristics and functions, who comes either alongside us (John 14:25-26) or dwells within us (1 Cor. 2) in order to relate to us—face-to-face, the personhood of God relating to us persons.

You see, *the Holy Spirit as God is the personal agent of God’s relationship with us, who not only draws us into a deeper relationship with Christ, but who then in and through our ongoing relationship with Christ loves us, shapes and forms, reforms us.* That’s what happens when we encounter Christ: we’re changed and are being changed and are never the same again. We are being changed, transformed (2 Cor. 3:18) as the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit—that is, with our souls, our hearts, the depths of our being, the core of who we are—and tells us who we are. From the depths of *this* knowledge, we live from out of this profound relationship with Christ, embodied in love toward others. To be baptized means that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, participating in us as we participate in Christ. Christ is not some distant historical figure that we believe in; he’s a present historical presence who relates to us, encounters us personally, respects us as persons.

Regin Prenter (1907-1990), a Danish Lutheran pastor and theologian, wrote a marvelous book on the nature of the Spirit’s work within us, *Spiritus Creator*, written in 1953. A remarkable soul, Prenter was part of the Danish resistance against the Nazis during WWII. I read this work when I was in seminary, and it left an enormous impression upon me. He said, “...the Spirit is the real, divine sphere in which Christ comes out of the remoteness of history and the realm of pure ideas and becomes living, present reality—becomes experience.”¹

Experience.

A *human* experience marked by growth and transformation. While it’s true that God accepts us where we are, God never leaves us there, but takes us someplace else. Part of that journey treks out over the landscape of the human heart and spirit, the journey within. The journey requires listening to the voice of the Spirit who bear witness to our spirits and gives us

direction. And on that journey, we discover who God is and we discover who we truly are as God's beloved children. Sure, the journey runs through our relationships, with this community of faith, with our families, neighbors, strangers, the world—and the journey also takes place within.

In the depths of the relationship we discover that God is always seeking us as we are to take us where we need to go—and always driven by love. The Spirit speaking to the depths of our spirits seeks to draw us deeper and deeper into relationship with God, which is what Jesus came to do. And in the relationship, through this love, we are indeed changed, transformed. For in love and through love Christ wishes to change us—*not* to make us into something or someone we're not, but to make us, or better, *free* us to be more authentically who we are. God wants us to see ourselves as the people God already knows us to be, which means seeing ourselves with some sense of the way God sees. My mentor at Princeton Seminary, James Loder, often said to me, "Become who you are."² God's desire is that we become more authentic and real and honest about who we *already* are as God's own, that we become more loving and just and forgiving and hopeful human beings, that we have within us something of the heart of God, which will allow us then, like Christ, to enter into human suffering and embody in our lives the presence, love, and hope of God.

Life in the Spirit is about transformation—deepening our capacity to love and to be loved. In love the Spirit is always trying to nudge us, poke or prod us, even kick us out of our selfishness, out of tight, confined corners cowering in fear, pushing us out toward the world, to the other, seeing God in the other, engaging the other with empathy. The Spirit pushes us to do things that we resist because of anxiety, like truly loving our neighbors. The Spirit, in love, calls us to listen to the depths of our souls, to give up living on the surface, and challenges us to go deep. In love, the Spirit prays for us, companions us, walks beside us like a friend, and takes us where we need to go—not necessarily where we want to go, but need to go in order to do God's will and embody God's justice in the world. In love the Spirit gives us an experience of God—the reality of God, the mystery and wonder of God—and that's what matters most in the church and the world. In love the Spirit helps us to remember who we are and whose we are and connects us with the Source of our Being. And when we live in this truth, we are free to become who we are: children of God.

This is what the Holy Spirit is doing in our lives. The Spirit reminds us time and again, who we are and whose we are. We are children of God. Now I know that all this might sound like pious platitudes. I know how difficult it is for us to claim this for ourselves, to really hear this, believe this, live from this truth. That's why we need an advocate, a companion like the Holy Spirit who tells us things we cannot tell ourselves.

Francis of Assisi (1181/82-1226) knew that we need advocates. Francis' father had great dreams for his son, dreams that came crashing down when Francis heard the voice of the Christ who led him in a different direction, into ministry. His father was furious. His father humiliated and shamed Francis in the town square. Francis lived in poverty on the outskirts of Assisi, Italy, but had to go up into town now and again. He was often wary of making the trip should he encounter his father. One day, on the way up to Assisi, Francis asked a beggar sitting along the side of the road to walk with him. Francis said to him, "Every time my father yells an insult at

me in one ear, tells me I'm dirt, that I don't count, whisper in my other ear, 'You're a child of God. You're a child of God. And keep telling me so until I believe it.'"³

Whether it's through the voice of a beggar or the community of the church that reminds us daily who we are, whether it's through the wisdom of our dreams or the voice of loved ones who tell us again and again until we really believe it—the Spirit does whatever it takes to bear witness with our spirits that we are indeed children of God.

¹ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000 [1946]), 198-199. Theologian George S. Hendry made a similar point in his classic work *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956): "The personality of the Spirit is important for faith...because...in Spirit meets us and deals with us personally. Without the personal work of the Spirit we could have Christ only as an impersonal memory. It is the living person of God, present in his Spirit, that unites us with Christ and through him deals personally with us" (42).

² For more on Loder, I recommend his important work *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989). See also Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theolog of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

³ As told by Fr. Richard Rohr at the Men's Rites of Passage Retreat, Rolling Ridge Retreat Center, Harper's Ferry, WV, October 2011.