

Sermon
God's Story: "In Christ" Romans 8:1-11
July 13, 2008

God's Story is huge. The late Reginald Fuller who taught at Seabury-Western, the Episcopal seminary in Evanston, wrote in his classic volume THE BOOK OF THE ACTS OF GOD: "The Bible is a "historical" literature in which God is proclaimed as the chief actor in history who alone gives history its meaning." Or as some one once said of God, "History is his story!" Yes, God's story is huge, encompassing the sweep of eternity. To dip into God's Story at any one point is a bit like the proverbial account of the group of blind men all touching an elephant at various places and describing the whole of the animal in terms of the part they felt - the leg or trunk or tail. Yes, our attempts to fully grasp the breadth and height and depth and length of God's story always come up short, leaving us with a part and not the whole.

Still, for those of us who believe that the God who called the world into being and who claimed Israel as God's own is also the very same God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, for us there is one fact of faith in God's Story that rises above all others. Two sentences from the Christian New Testament proclaim this faith fact boldly and directly. The first is from the Gospel according to John: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And the second is a line from one of the letters, which the apostle Paul wrote to the early Christian community in Corinth, Greece: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not

counting their trespasses against them..."

This faith fact – that God was somehow, somehow not just with Jesus, but was truly in Jesus, (we call this the Incarnation) this faith fact becomes the central affirmation of our Christian belief. In Jesus Christ we see an unsurpassable fulfillment to the story of God. The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ confirms as much:

"In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you (God) have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself."

On this faith fact our lives as Christians rise or fall. And if it is not true, as Paul said, we are the most to be pitied of all peoples!

This morning as we begin our summer of Sunday worship experiences about "God's Story, Our Story, My Story," it seemed wise to me to commence at the jumping off point for every Christian journey – to affirm that God was in Christ and to commit our lives to be lived "in Christ!"

Today's Bible reading encompasses a key passage from the central chapter in what is perhaps Paul's most eloquent, thoughtful, and theological writing. We read from Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, a letter some have labeled Paul's "theological last will and testament." In these words of Paul we see the big picture about what it means for us not just to believe that God was in Christ, but equally as important for

us, to know what it means to be “in Christ” ourselves. So I invite you now to turn in your pew Bible to p. 147 in the New Testament. We will read from the 8th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, beginning with verse 1 and continuing through the 11th. Before we read, let us pray: God of life, your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. Your spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture. Your Spirit draws us to Christ and helps us to acknowledge him as Lord. We ask that you will send your Spirit now to give us deeper insight, encouragement, faith, and hope through the proclamation of the good news. Amen.

(Kids, get ready now, because the answers you need for your puzzles are in this reading)

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.

OK, I’ll grant you that getting your head around these thoughts of Paul takes some doing, especially on a lovely summer Sunday morning when our minds are better at thinking about swinging a golf club this afternoon or tipping a tall glass of lemonade on the patio! As the great Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay said of these exact verses, this is “a very difficult passage.” That’s an understatement, don’t you agree?

Paul is never easy. And here Paul seems at his most complicated self! His words are intentionally rhetorical. But as Ed Markquart, a pastor in Des Moines, IA, has said of this chapter of Romans: “There is more food for the soul here than anywhere else in the Bible.” I know that is saying something, but I tend to agree with my Lutheran brother.

Now for us to get inside Paul’s head, we have to look at two words he uses again and again in this section. They are words, which are potentially misleading. The two words are “flesh” and “spirit.” He uses the word flesh ten times and the word Spirit eleven times! We can’t understand this passage unless we understand these two words. But they don’t mean for Paul what you might think!

By "Spirit," Paul is not referring to some disembodied existence where human "souls" are separated from bodies.

We're not talking Halloween ghosties here. And when Paul uses the word "flesh" he isn't referring to our bodies nor is he condemning our physical selves, as some think!

What Paul means by "Spirit" is the Spirit of God in Christ who dwells in the bodies of believers like you and like me and who also lives in communal bodies of believers like this congregation. When Paul says "Spirit" he is affirming the significance of our relationships with God and with each other and of the value of our daily lives in these relationships. And likewise when Paul uses the word "flesh" he is not negating our physicality, or condemning our bodies as somehow lesser or sinful. Flesh for Paul was his way of speaking about a living a life that is over against God. Flesh is Paul's code word for being disconnected in relationship from God and from others.

Life in the spirit, on the other hand, is life that is connected to God; Spirit means we belong to God and to God's purposes and to each other, God's people. Life in the Spirit means living for God. Life in the flesh means living a life that is unconnected to God. And bottom line for Paul is this: we have life that really is life when we are involved in Jesus' goodness. Paul would have liked a hymn by Cecil Alexander which I learned in my childhood:

He (Jesus) died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood.

There was no other good enough

To pay the price of Sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in.

And then comes the chorus: O dearly dearly has he loved, and we must love him too; and trust in his redeeming blood, and try his works to do.

Yes, Paul would have liked that. The hymn writer got it! When we are in Christ, we love Jesus; we trust in God, and we try as best we are able to do what Jesus did, to do God's works.

When we are in Christ, our spirits come alive. When we are in Christ, our lives get transformed. When we are in Christ, our wills get empowered and our hands get strengthened to do justice, to love kindness, to be peacemakers and healers and bringers of wholeness. When we are in Christ, we wake up each morning and say: This is a day and I am a child that God has made. How will I rejoice and be glad in this today?

Let me put another way. Most of you know that I recently hosted my two grandchildren, Bryce and Brittany, for the week of our Vacation Bible Camp. I have to say that being parent was an honor. But being a grandparent is a joy! When I see my grandchildren, and when we are together, I wait for the moment when they crawl into my lap and give me a hug and tell me that they love me. My heart comes on fire, becomes alive, and becomes uplifted. Their spirit gets into my spirit, and I become alive.

That's what it is to be "in Christ!" When God gets inside of you, when the Holy Spirit wakes you up and gets into your spirit and makes you live, well,

everything changes – how you think, what you do, how you feel, everything. You see, we are made of the stuff of the earth to be sure, but we are also stuffed full of the life of the Spirit. There is a divine spark in us, in you, in me, in all of us, a divine glory, and that spark ignites us in Christ, sets us off. We are fire, yes we are. Fire for God in this world. When Christ's spirit is in you, you experience life; you live life on God's terms, in God's way. There is an old legend that tells so St. Francis of Assisi calling out to an almond tree in the middle of winter: "Speak to me of God!" and the almond tree breaks into bloom! It comes alive.

When you are in Christ, there is no other way of witnessing to God but by aliveness. The Spirit is the breath of divine life in you

Eugene Peterson in THE MESSAGE translates Paul's words in Romans this way:

"It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself?"

Yes, it stands to reason...when God lives and breathes in you – as God did in Jesus – you'll be alive in Christ, and free to get on with the job of living for God and being God's good news to others.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on
me
Melt me mold me fill me use me
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on
me!