

Series on Romans. July 16, 2017. Proper 10

– Genesis 25:19-34, Psalm 119:105-112, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

Last Sunday, Fr. David gave us a very creative and insightful profile of the apostle Paul, both as a scholar of the Law of Moses and as a man primed from birth and driven by personality to achieve and deal with power. If God wanted a theologian for this new Jesus Movement and a leader capable of organizing its spread beyond the boundaries of Israel, it was going to be with someone like Paul and not one of the fishermen from Galilee. And so, on the road to Damascus, Jesus literally turns Paul's world upside down and inside out. For an intellectual purist like Paul, this was a conversion experience with "no escape routes" and Paul spent the rest of his life working on reframing his Jewish theology to encompass the inescapable truth of that experience.

So, what is the gist of Paul's message for us in today's passage and how can we reframe our life to encompass that truth? For Paul, the Law of Moses was "holy, just and good", but as our passage today from the Psalms reflects, it was also purely external. You obeyed the laws of righteousness because the alternative was to face the wrath of God. Being obedient to the law made you feel righteous, but the law was not able to confront the problem of our own human nature that seems to drive us. To use the language of the church, we had not been transformed and had failed to claim our full birthright as Children of God. To do that, we needed a new moral force that could liberate us from our baser natures and draw us within to learn how to live by the "law of the Spirit". For Paul, that freedom was now made available to us through the coming of Christ.

But how does that happen? Well, here's my dumb and dirt lay theological interpretation. For Paul, the coming of Christ was a divine intervention into the human realm and an identification with our human condition. Christ said, "the Father is in me and I am in the Father" and the same can be true for you! Fr. Steve Holmes, in his site *Unfolding Light*, explains it this way: Christ is "all God's embodiment of love, God's energy appearing in matter, Word made flesh" ... "we too are finite instances of the infinite love of God, just as Jesus was. God's spirit, which we see in him, is in all of us." But here's the rub. This transformation is not something we achieve or "do" by ourselves alone, but it is the creation and gift of God, acted out through the power of the Holy Spirit. It thus depends on "faith" and the trust to allow our life to be transformed and ruled by the Spirit within us.

Right ... it's at this point that we're tempted to say "sounds good, now let's give it a quick genuflects and go on to another subject. This seems way too complicated for real life". But wait: Let's just play around with this a bit and see if perhaps Paul is on to something here. Paul says, and Fr. David seemed to reiterate last week, that it is a matter of our mind set; of breaking our human tendency to put Self at the center of the universe, thus denying the claim both of our Creator and all other beings and instead allowing our life to be guided by the Spirit that lives within us and to be the determining force of our lives. So, let's start playing with the pieces of our puzzle.

I think the first piece is to acknowledge our own human nature, without apologies or excuses. As Paul was so quick to point out, what we want to do and what we actually do are frequently at odds with each other. As Christ said of his disciples sleeping in the Garden, “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”, so let’s own it and ask God to help us be aware of when our selfish longings and desires begin to surface. It’s not a sin to be human, but it is a sin to allow it to separate us from our Creator and the Holy Spirit within us. ... Forgive Us Lord.

In Matthew this morning, we heard the Parable of the Sower. At one time or another, we are every one of those seeds that don’t bear fruit. Sometimes we hear a truth but don’t understand it or are simply not ready yet to absorb it. Sometimes we can understand but are not prepared to make the sacrifices needed to follow it through to completion. In a word, we lack the depth of commitment. But I think the most frequent cause for not changing is that we are too quickly distracted by our own little world of needs, wants and demands. “Someday”, the litany goes, when things are less hectic, when the children are raised, when we finally retire ... and someday never comes. ... Forgive us Lord.

And so, the second piece, after acknowledging our own humanity, is to make the actual decision to take up the challenge and opportunity God has given us. Unlike Paul, we are not likely to get dragged kicking and screaming into the Light. Jesus said, “seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you”, but that passage assumes that the choice is up to us. The spiritual journey is our own to travel and perhaps we don’t energetically seek or forcefully knock because we’re not sure we actually want to find out what is behind that door.

In our Old Testament reading, Esau has an important decision to make, but he can’t seem to get beyond his immediate external need for a good hot meal. “I am famished ... of what use is a birthright to me”. In a world where a birthright had such lifelong consequences, how shortsighted could a young man be? And yet, aren’t we doing the same thing when we turn away from our birthright to live through the power of the Holy Spirit within us? Doesn’t that also have lifelong consequences? ... Help us Lord.

Decisions are hard and yet every day of our life we face situations where we must choose between “a grievance or a miracle”. I know that may sound like strange wording, but in truth every situation we face gives us two possibilities: to react from our external self, such as what’s in this for me or that really ticks me off ... or to respond by falling back onto the spirit within us and asking for guidance. Trust me, even before the Holy Spirit acts, just making that choice is a miracle! ... Help us Lord.

The final piece of the puzzle, and sometimes I think the most difficult one, is to practice being conscious of when the Spirit within us really does act on our behalf. When we are facing a life crisis, we tend to be right there, knocking on the door of the spirit, asking for help. But when things go right, it’s easy to take the spirit for granted. Yet in truth, growing our faith requires watching this interplay between our external life and the Spirit within us. We build spiritual trust when we can experience the shift within us and

the power of that guidance in our daily life. If we are to receive the gifts of the Spirit, we must learn not only to listen and be aware but also to remember who's doing the leading. At the end of the moment or of the day, we must practice the prayer ... Thank you Lord.

So, let's leave here today being willing to test Paul's challenge of freedom. That liberation may be a gift from God and the work of the Holy Spirit, but that does not mean that we can be passive or indifference. We have our tasks as well: to become aware of our self-centered leanings at the moment they are surfacing, to make the decision to allow the spirit to guide us and to then be conscious of the how that spirit changes our lives. And if that seems like too much to remember, then you just need to remember three prayers and use them faithfully:

Forgive me Lord (for I am human and will remain so till my last breath)

Help me Lord (for I truly desire to be led by your guiding hand) and

Thank you, Lord, (for You graciously give and I must gratefully receive).

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