

Sermon

The Spirit of Life and Freedom

Psalm 139, Rom. 8: 1-11.

This text from Romans 8, which is prescribed by the lectionary for today, proclaims that “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death.”

There’s a lot of meat in this text. Let’s begin to unpack it.

Like all New Testament texts, it comes to us from the ancient world, about 2000 years ago, a very different world from ours. If we want to understand any text from another time, we need first to consider “the world behind the text,” as well as “the world in front of the text.” By the world behind the text I refer to its author, and also those to whom it was written, as well as the cultural context, in which it was written and received. What was the author saying to the people of his time?

But the world in front of the text is our world of here and now. How do we receive this text, and what does it mean for us? If we are really going to hear the text, we can’t just make it say whatever we want it to say. We have to attend to the author’s original intention. But we can’t stop there. The text has a life of its own; it has power to speak to us, 2000 years later, in very different circumstances. With scriptural texts, as Christians, we listen for a Word from God, for us, here and now.

So, what about the world behind this text?

The author is Paul the apostle, and this is a long theological letter, written to the Christians at Rome, that great imperial city, in approximately the year 60 (before any of the gospels were written). The congregation at Rome was small (maybe even smaller than East Plains) made up partly of converted Jews, but also probably some slaves captured from conquered nations, and perhaps a few prosperous gentile Romans as well. They met secretly, because they were a persecuted group, a very young, growing movement that quietly challenged the Roman Empire. Important to notice: they were a religious movement, but also a peaceful social movement of resistance.

Paul himself was a Jew, like Jesus and all of the apostles. In fact, Paul was originally Saul of Tarsus. The Jews were mostly a commercial, trading

people, spread out over much of Europe and western Asia – that's called the "diaspora," Jews who did not live in Judaea. Paul was a diaspora Jew who came from the city of Tarsus, located in what is now Turkey.

Moreover, he had been a member of that very conservative party within Judaism, the Pharisees. As a Pharisee, before his conversion to Christ, Paul would have believed passionately in the strict observance of the Mosaic law, i.e., all the dietary regulations, circumcision, the ritual requirements, the strict keeping of the Sabbath day, as well as the moral law of the Ten Commandments. In the book of Acts, we learn that, as a Pharisee, Paul had actually been a persecutor of Christians, and participated in the stoning to death of the Christian martyr Stephen.

Now, as a young man, having heard the Christian preachers, and having had a visionary experience of Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul was converted to the Christian faith. For him this was a liberation. He felt that he was "set free from the law of sin and death."

The law of sin and death, for Paul, meant the law that condemned him. According to the Pharisees, if you did not obey every law, meticulously, you would die. Sin leads to death. God will condemn and punish you in one way or another. Paul, as a Pharisee, knew that he was a sinner, that he failed to fulfill the whole law, and was therefore under the threat of God's judgment.

But now, as a Christian Paul says in his letter to the Romans: "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Having left behind his Pharisaism, he can say: "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free." This is because, through Jesus' life and teaching, his death and resurrection, God has reached out to us with love and grace. We learn through Christ that God loves all people with inexhaustible, gracious love. This is what Paul means by 'grace'. It is the free, unconditioned love of God, like that of a parent, who loves her children no matter what. The love of our Creator is a love that cannot be earned, because it is grace, it is free. This is the love that sets us free, so that we do not live in fear of God, but rather with love for God.

But what does freedom mean for Paul? It's certainly not just doing anything you like. No, Paul says we have to obey the law of Christ, which is the law of love. In chapter 13 of Romans, Paul says: "anyone who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law." And we all remember Paul's great hymn of love in I Corinthians 13, where love is the greatest of God's gifts. In this

way Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus, when he said: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. This is the whole of the law and the prophets.” That in turn echoed the words of the prophet Micah, a Hebrew prophet of many centuries earlier, who said: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” So Paul is very much in line here with the tradition of the prophets, and with Jesus. He points to the heart and essence of God’s will, which is love. Agape. Compassionate love. Kindness.

For Paul, you see, we are set free from strict rules and regulations, and free from fear of condemnation; but we are free FOR love of God and the neighbour.

Paul also knows that if we choose not to live by Christ’s law of love, we will become “slaves of sin.” That’s the term he uses elsewhere in this letter. That is: We shouldn’t think we’re free just by doing anything we like. We’ll just become the slave of our own selfish impulses. Freedom is not just FROM something; it’s also freedom FOR something: free FOR a life of justice, of loving care and service to others. That is where true joy is found.

This is what Paul calls “law of the Spirit of life.”

What, or who, is this Spirit of life? This too is part of the world behind the text. Because Paul, as a Jew, was steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, and well acquainted with the whole idea of God as Spirit. We’ve been singing this morning about the Spirit of life. The term comes to us from Paul, but he derived it from the Hebrew tradition.

For many centuries, the Hebrew people spoke of God as Spirit. Reading the Bible, in both testaments, we often hear of the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit. As you know, the term ‘Spirit’ means Wind or Breath. The ancient people of Israel thought of God as something like wind or breath. Like the wind, they said, God the Creator is invisible to our eyes, but powerful and dynamic, and free.

It was the Spirit, the Wind of God, that inspired Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery. It was the Spirit that inspired the prophets when they cried out for justice for the poor, when they called for mercy for widows and orphans, and foreigners.

In Genesis we hear that the Spirit was at work even in the original creation. The Psalms and the prophets also speak of God the Creator Spirit as the

source of all life. Metaphorically, the Spirit is God's breathing into the world, the divine presence and power in the world, all around us and within us.

And this presence of the Spirit is uncontained and unconfined. Like the wind, the Spirit is anywhere and everywhere. There is nowhere, where the Spirit is not. As the Psalmist says, in Psalm 139, which we've read this morning: "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in hell you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me." Other psalms, like Psalm 104, e.g., speak of the Spirit as the energy and life of all creation. The Spirit lives within all creation. The Spirit is the inner intelligence and beauty of the created order, of all animals and plants. The Spirit of life is alive in and through all things.

Now all of this is part of the way Paul thinks. He is the inheritor of this long, rich tradition of faith in God as Spirit. And he believes that the Spirit was especially upon Jesus, and through Jesus, the Spirit is now alive in Christians and the Christian community, inspiring, liberating, guiding.

So that's the world behind the text.

Well, what about the world in front of the text: our world, our context, here and now? What does the text say to us today?

First of all, we note that there's a lot in common between the world behind the text, Paul's world, and our world. The human condition is fundamentally the same. Human nature is not much different. We are capable of both good and evil. We are capable of great pleasure, but we also suffer and die. None of that is changed in 2000 years.

Today we know a lot more now about the realm of nature, through science; we have marvellous new technologies. But we may have less awareness of the divine Spirit. We tend to be sceptical of anything we can't see, anything not accessible to scientific investigation. And scepticism is not necessarily bad. But the magnificent world of forests and seas, animals and birds, stars and planets, still has the power to enthrall us with wonder. The order, and beauty of nature spoke to ancient people, and can still speak to us, of a divine Spirit, an unimaginable Mind and Power, who is its Creator and Sustainer.

But what about our relationship to law, and freedom? Perhaps we are quite different today than the people whom Paul was addressing two thousand

years ago. Especially as liberal Protestants, or even as secular people today, most of us are not much concerned about condemnation. We don't tend to think of God as a harsh judge who will punish us. This is our protestant and liberal heritage. And this is a good thing. But, maybe we've become rather casual about our sin and guilt. If we tell people that God loves and forgives them, they're not necessarily interested. They're not worried about it. Maybe we modern people have lost something in this respect. Maybe we're rather too blasé about whether we are living according to God's will. Loss of the sense of spiritual reality, can create a sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness, which is common in our time.

Nevertheless, we can still feel guilt. We can doubt our personal worthiness, or personal value. We know we are not all that we should be. So, as Christians, we know that we need constantly to be forgiven. Then, free from fear of condemnation, we can live our lives joyfully. We don't need to grovel before God. We stand before God with dignity as God's beloved, beautiful children.

But it's still true, isn't it, that real freedom is not just doing whatever you want to do. If we're the slaves of our selfish impulses, our lives will be full of chaos and conflict. Perhaps we have a cult of "freedom" today, especially in this part of the world, and in this I'm sure we're quite different from people living in Rome in the first century. We tend to think we have a right to do whatever we want. Like: "Don't tell me I have to wear a mask. This is a free country!" "Don't you dare deprive me of the right to carry a gun. That's my right as a free man." Or: "Why should I limit my use of fossil fuels? Don't tell me how to spend my money. I'm free to do as I please." We're suspicious of authority. It's common for people to think that freedom is all about the absence of constraints of any kind, as though freedom is the absence of obligations.

But that's self-deceptive. True freedom requires discipline and community solidarity. It's freedom FOR a meaningful life of caring for others, of serving others, of seeking justice and fairness for others, of giving joy to others. True freedom, inspired by the Spirit of life, is a generous life, because we find true freedom in relationships of love. Remember the words of Jesus: "Love one another, that your joy may be full."

At the beginning I mentioned that the early church was not only a religious movement, but a social movement of resistance, in which the

Spirit was at work in the Roman Empire. In our time, the world in front of the text, I suggest there are social movements in which the Spirit is present. Think of the American black civil rights movement, led by Rev. Martin Luther King. Think of Gandhi's movement against the British Empire in India. These movements have not been exclusively made up of religious people. The Spirit is free, and not confined to us Christians. "God works in us and others by the Spirit." Think of the women's movement, the pro-gay movement, in Canada the pro-indigenous movement, just now, the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Think of the environmental movement against climate change. I suggest that, by faith, we perceive in all of these, powerful movements of the Spirit of life in our world.

Where our personal lives are concerned, perhaps the best way to end this is to quote Paul from another letter, the letter to the Galatians, chapter 5. Paul speaks of the fruits of the Spirit. The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, works within us to bear fruit.

Paul says: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

So we can open ourselves, praying that we will grow in the Spirit, and so, more and more, bear these gifts of the Spirit in today's world.

Now let's pray once again by singing the single verse of Spirit of Life, VU 381.

