*“IN CHRIST”*

Romans 8:1-11

Trinity Sunday

May 30, 2021

This, the Sunday after Pentecost, is Trinity Sunday, and I think some wag explained that we can’t have very much of that Pentecostal Holy Spirit; we have to show that it is lashed together with the Father and the Son not some god-thing out on its own with its own agenda, you know. However, the Orthodox Christians, believers of the ancient Eastern Churches -- Egyptian, Syrian, Greek, Russian . . . Christians who never broke off with the Roman Catholics to begin with, the Orthodox Churches believe that we Westerners set too much stock in the Second Person of the Trinity (Jesus Christ) and not enough in the Holy Spirit at all.

So instead of preaching about God’s love in Jesus Christ which John 3 sets us up for, I want to deal with Romans 8 and the Holy Spirit.

This chapter has long been one of my favorites because it tells us how God delivers us from the flesh—that is, from the part of our humanness which is set against God—God delivers us from this willingness against God, this tendency that kills our holiness, and delivers us into life by the Holy Spirit. It’s the Holy Spirit that gives you and me our life with God, people!

I should have started our reading at v. 1 of chapter 8. The passage says, “It follows therefore (from ch. 7:6, incidentally, which says

but now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code, but in the new life of the Spirit.

Romans 8:1 then says: **“It follows therefore that those who are in Christ Jesus fall now under no condemnation whatever.**” It is the law that leads to condemnation, both because sin fastens its grip upon us through the law, and because judgment takes place on the basis of what the law has told us to do or not to do. Paul does not say, we will note, that Christians are free from condemnation because they are *sinless –* we are, of course, not sinless -- but because we are *in Christ*. 8:2 says it: **For the religion which is made possible in Christ Jesus, namely that of the life-giving Spirit, liberates from the old law which is abused by sin and leads to death** (Rom 8:2). The Holy Spirit, you see, produces life just as law and sin produce death, and the whole process is put into effect and operates in Christ. Can’t separate what God is doing in us by the Holy Spirit, from Christ, can we?

And yet, and still, the brief opening line of this eighth chapter of Romans is nearly unbelievable. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Anyone who has lived has done things for which they deserve condemnation. Maybe “condemnation” is not a word we would use, but surely “blame” and “guilt” are.

We receive word that a member of the church, a friend, is sick, and we promise to hold him or her in our thoughts and prayers. Life gets hectic and days go by without our uttering a single prayer, or even having a sympathetic thought for our sick friend. The next week in church, we learn during *Sharing our Joys and Concerns* that our friend’s health has worsened, and we wince at our own unfeeling, our failure to have allowed our friend’s illness even to pierce our consciousness.

Now we pray, “O God, help me remember to prepare a casserole or at the very least to send a card.” If you are not guilty of a shortcoming like this, there are undoubtedly other actions –or, more likely failures to act – for which you feel guilt. All of us are deserving of some condemnation.

The phrase by which we confess sin – and sometimes the Prayer of Confession in our worship service phrases it like this: “by what we have done, and by what we have left undone” [that phrase by which we confess our sin] covers just about all the things for which we are deserving of condemnation. If there is a boatload of guilt for the things we have done, there is surely an *ocean full* of guilt for the things we have left undone, yes?

So how are we to believe this nearly unbelievable thing – that ‘there is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ?’ The key is perhaps found in the tiniest phrase: “in Christ.” To being “in Christ” is categorically different from not being “in Christ.” It is not simply a difference of degree, it’s a genuine difference of kind.

To be “in Christ” is to be a part of something far larger than oneself. It is to encounter a power astronomically greater than the sum of all the willpower you have ever mustered, added to all the physical power you have ever exerted, added to all the clout you have ever had. Add all those up, and it is infinitesimal, compared to the power of God in Christ.

There is a severe power shortage on our side. It is not that we are powerless, for surely we have the power to hurt others and ourselves, as well as to help others and help ourselves. It is just that our power is so bound by our capacities, so limited by our perspectives, so tied to our locale. This may be what Paul means by the phrase “in the flesh.”

But . . . BUT . . . [now here’s the Trinity Sunday of this passage for us] . . . to be “in Christ” is to be swept up in the *power of the Spirit* and be free from what has bound us, limited us, tied us down, tied us up. To be “in Christ” is to be in that power of Almighty God that works now on this earth in our time, --the present power and activity of God we call the Holy Spirit, right?

And to be “in Christ” is not the result of something we do. It is something God does for us. Paul does not exhort the reader to get his or her act together and get “in Christ.” No. He announces, he boldly proclaims: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (v. 9). This proclamation is the good news. “You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Romans 8:9. Remember it. Make it yours. This is the good news. ‘You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.’

It is difficult to believe this good news, but not impossible. To believe it is to reorient one’s life toward a power greater than ourselves. Even more, it is to have one’s life reoriented by a power more powerful than any power we know in this world. Perhaps the greatest power we know in the world is the power of death, which ultimately conquers all of us and everyone we know. Death’s power is not simply at the moment of our dying, though. It is a power that creeps into our bodies, into our lives, into our communities, long before the moment we breathe our last.

Ask any alcoholic about the power of death, and if he or she can speak truth, the words will be about the living death they know. Ask any parent of a child who is dying from a devastating disease, and you will hear of the power of death to break a heart even before the child’s body gives up. However, even this power is not enough when compared to the power of “the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead.”

In v. 11 of our passage in Romans, Paul proclaims that this Spirit “will give life to your mortal bodies.” By this Paul could mean that our bodies can get the air they need, the coursing blood required to keep them going, even the food and water to nourish them.

My bet is that Paul means at least this, but there is most likely something more expressed here. Giving life to our mortal bodies is not simply giving them the essentials of bodily function. It is to bring to our bodies, bound as they are to time and space, [bring them into]a power that is able to connect them to a movement of God’s Spirit -- a power greater than themselves, huh?

This Spirit that we have “in Christ” is able to do so much more than we are able to do, more than we allow ourselves to dare or think. On our own, we are not able to get it all done; so much is left undone. By this tiny phrase, “in Christ” Paul has said that we are not constrained by our limitations, our shortcomings, our failings. We are not even condemned by our cruelties, hurtful ways, hateful actions. Instead, you and I are free. *Free.*

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1). This freedom is nearly unbelievable, but not completely unbelievable. It is the freedom given to us to go beyond our limitations. It is the freedom of being part of God’s movement with the world that transcends our church and our neighborhood and our lifetime. This freedom does not transport us out of our bodies into a netherworld beyond the pearly gates. Instead it frees us to live fully in this world, in the mortal body we still have. This freedom is yours and mine in Christ. It is the result of the power of God, a power greater than the sum of all powers. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit to you and me who are in Christ.

Amen.