

Trinity 8-2020

Romans 8:12-17

Matthew 7:15ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

If the Epistle of Romans is Paul’s ‘Magnum Opus’, then perhaps we should consider chapter 8 the absolute apogee; a greatest within the greatest! It is here that he answers the haunting question of the previous chapter, and the one that dogs every self-aware and thoughtful soul; ‘Who will save us from this doomed existence; this body of death?’ You recall a scene in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, in which Sundance is going on about what he will tolerate or not from his girlfriend Etta, when Butch replies, “Why do you have to sugar coat it, Kid; Tell her straight!” St. Paul is about as unvarnished as can be in his response. First is the problem. “You are not indebted to the flesh, but if you live according to it, YOU WILL DIE.” Then comes his salve; If you live by the Spirit; live in your adopted status as God’s own, YOU WILL LIVE. Here we have articulated the great tension of life. We will need to be clear about what Paul means about flesh and spirit...in a moment.

A month or so ago I re-engaged an old novel from 1960 called *The Moviegoer* after reading an article on it by Dr. Frey from the University of South Carolina. The author was Walker Percy, one of the Southern Catholic writers from the mid-twentieth century. Raised in an affluent family he lived with an uncle following the death of his parents, and eventually attended UNC-Chapel Hill and then Columbia Medical School. But after contracting tuberculosis and spending much time reading in convalescence, he decided to become a writer. It won National Book Award against an impressive group including Salinger’s *Franny* and *Zooey* and Heller’s *Catch 22*.

The book, narrated by the chief character, is about 30 year-old Binx Bolling, born into aristocracy in New Orleans. Raised by his aunt Emily in the Garden district of the old town, he is taught all the proper ways for a man to be gentleman—accomplished, successful, erudite. So, Binx moves to a suburb called, *Gentilly* where, as in most suburbs he is not bound by social mores, tradition, or collective meaning, but is free to chase after self-indulgence. By his own admission he spends his time making money, dallying with the girls, and going to movies. It is in the movies that he finds escape from his own emptiness. In the theatre he is closer to John Wayne in the movie, *Stagecoach*, than to any living soul for he admits to having no real friends. Strikingly, the marquee at the cinema reads, “Where happiness costs so little”. But he is unsettled. One day on the bus he has a revelation that there must be something more. Paul’s stark question, who will save me from this doomed existence, looks a lot like this.

Aunt Emily Cutrer, who describes herself as ‘Episcopalian by emotion, Greek by nature, and Buddhist by choice’, gives him the point of contrast. She doesn’t really have a frame of reference for any eternal truth, and even says she has no idea why we are on this insignificant speck of dust but suggests that in the end all a man can do is ‘soldier on’. She displays no conception that perhaps there is some transcendent goal toward which we are seeking and journeying. Nevertheless, she still uses all the language of religion, like grace and sin and redemption, but as Binx discovers they are meaningless and empty; disconnected from real life. Again, Paul describes the condition—If you live after the flesh, you will die.

We need to be clear about this language. It is NOT suggesting that life with the enjoyment of bodily existence is the problem. There is no condemnation of life lived out as we are created with

the capacity for pleasure. Flesh here means living without any reference to the end and goal of life! It is what we call Sin. Unfortunately, that word has become devalued by poor use. Too often it has come to be used by the Church as a series of “Don’ts”, as if the spiritual life were merely an avoidance of list of ‘no-no’s’. This is the trivialization of a deadly serious issue. When the faith says that something is not permissible it is because to engage in it is destructive to ourselves. The other movement in our culture and time is to pretend that no-such condition exists. How dare someone suggest that there is any authority that holds me to any standard of being other than the one I select. Since truth is whatever a person says it is, then the idea of violating it is nonsense. We need to reject both as grossly inadequate and frankly, immature.

I suggested to you a few weeks ago that we need an honest definition of sin as we confess it. I believe it is a disordered self, worshipping its own broken image and state. It is displacing God, to whom we are indebted, with our own inordinate self-love so that **THE RESULT IS LOSS OF HUMAN HAPPINESS**. In Greek, (hamartia) it is missing the target or goal. Sin robs us of that goal-happiness. Take the sin of lying as an example. What is actually underway and occurs when we lie? It wounds others by betraying trust; creates a false narrative and clouds truth; steals from others of what they want and need which is truth, and undermines community fabric.

Aquinas calls sin ‘not just an act, but an act with a defect’; it makes the goal impossible to attain. He goes on to cite three causes; ignorance, that is lack of awareness of feigned lack of the wrong; frailty or weakness as in the lack of fortitude to do what is right when pressure is on us; and malice, which is the choice to do what is wrong simply because we desire it. One of the most poignant descriptions of this is found in St. Augustine’s Confessions (Book 2, Chapter 4). When we read it today it seems a bit trivial by modern standards and yet it haunted him terribly. He tells of a group of friends going out one evening and seeing a pear tree in a neighbor’s garden, which he describes as ‘neither desirous in appearance nor in taste’. They shook the tree, stole the pears, ate very few, and threw the rest to pigs. It was upon long reflection that he realized the great pleasure he gained was not in getting the pears, but what pleased him was the simple act of doing wrong. “My pleasure lay...in the evil deed itself.” What led to guilt was not the seriousness of the act but the reality of what selecting and relishing the wrong really meant. If you live by the flesh, you will die.

BUT, Augustine’s very recognition of his inability to fix himself was also the turning point and beginning of his awareness of the need for grace, and what that grace could mean. “Who can untie this most twisted and intricate mass of knots”, he asks, and then writes, “With you there is true rest and life untroubled.” Paul’s way of saying it is, “You have not received a spirit of bondage again to fear, but the Spirit of adoption.” (19 times in this chapter Paul speaks of the Spirit—only 3 prior). Adoption is to be elected to the status of a child with a purpose and goal, not an alien wandering aimlessly. It creates a fresh and new standing and relationship to God, who is not addressed, “To Whom it May Be Concerned”, but as Father, the One for whom our well-being, happiness, and completion is a highest good. In Aramaic Ab is father, but the far more intimate and familiar is ABBA. Think about how children learn to address a parent initially; Daddy rather than Dad, Momma before Mom, because the intimacy precedes all other things, and is necessary for human completion and happiness. This is the Grace of God at work. What is the most intimate act of God’s connection with us? Is it not the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? How much closer could God come than to enter and participate in the most human and frail of moments!!

When we participate in the Sacraments, we are participating in this intimacy. Binx Bolling’s brother, Lonnie, in the novel refers to the Eucharist as “Sacrament of the Living” through which

we see God. While Binx has described his unbelief as unassailable, he knows that Lonnie's use of religious language is of a very different order than his aunt's, and he becomes willing to open up to the journey of discovery. Oddly, it is through Lonnie's death and the suffering of his to be wife, Kate, that he begins to be alive, because in them he moves beyond the emptiness of sin to intimacy and compassion, which are two of the virtues which drain us of self-absorption. Baptism begins by giving us a new identity—children of God—of the eternal bliss of life, and it is furthered by prevenient grace; Grace which intercedes for us and creates a home base, not rooted in emptiness but in the Spirit. We are no longer in debt to sin. We are in debt as coheirs with Christ. We are in debt to hope.

POSTSCRIPT: The Moviegoer ends on Ash Wednesday with Binx considering the meaning of God's presence in the everyday events and people. He commits to Kate, whose struggles will require long treatment, and yet he comes to believe that being with her is far superior to shallowness which has dogged him even though it is impossible to say where it will lead. Perhaps you and I, too, are on a journey and the goal is the bequest God constantly gives—presence, belonging, and happiness.

We are indebted to God; We are indebted to Christ; We are indebted to hope. Amen+