

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon for Sunday July 12, 2020
6th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: Spirit & Flesh

There is neither spirit nor matter in the world. The stuff of the universe is spirit-matter. No other substance but this could have produced the human molecule. *~Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

First Lesson: Romans 8:1-11 (NRSV)

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.

Second Lesson: Matthew 13:1-17

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

'You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,

and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.’

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

REFLECTION: “Yet In Our Flesh”

Our scripture has two views of creation. The first story of creation in Genesis Chapter One, tells us of the way that God takes the formless void, the darkness, and then separates it, speaking all creation into being in this new space in between. This story tells us that after each part of creation is brought forth, including men and women, God says, “It’s good.”

In Genesis chapter 2, there is another Creation story in which the inanimate earth is shaped into dull and lifeless figures, and then given spirit when God breathes life into them.

In our first story, there is good and evil. The chaos, the void, and the darkness are evil. Creation – the stuff in between – is good. In our second story, there is good and evil too, but there is also another dualism – there is spirit and there is matter. And, as the story progresses, that matter – our flesh, our bodies – becomes more and more associated with what is evil. Our second creation story ends with Adam and Eve being ashamed of their bodies, feeling small and inadequate before God, hastily trying to cover their nudity. Somehow, the creation that our first story assures us is so good, has fallen. The goodness that our first story tells us permeates all the wonderful things that God has spoken into being, has somehow lost its cohesive quality. Creation has flesh, and that flesh is suspect, weak, something to be ashamed of. That’s why we sing, “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent.” Creation has spirit, and spirit is the only good part – indestructible, pure and noble. That’s why we sing out, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore You.”

These two strands of thought continue right through our Bibles, all the way to The Revelation. This AC/DC thought continues in us as well. For many of us, the Christian goal is heaven, a place where there is only spirit, and we can be set free from this mortal coil. We all want to climb Jacob’s ladder and ascend to glory. And yet, we also – at the same time – believe that we are here to build the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. We believe not only in Jacob’s ladder, but also in Peter’s vision of all of creation falling down from heaven – clean and unclean – and understanding and proclaiming that it is all good.

Our scripture reading from today strongly underscores these two threads in our faith.

Paul, as you have no doubt discovered, falls on the side of flesh bad, spirit good. Last week, when Sheila read the beginning of this section of Romans, I wonder how Paul’s words made you feel? Last week, Paul spoke of the way that there are two laws at work in our being – the law of the flesh, which keeps dragging us down to sin, and the law of the spirit, which keeps trying to orient us towards what is pure, and holy and right. Paul even goes so far as to say, that as long as we have bodies we will fail, because the flesh keeps making us do the very thing which the spirit hates.

Today, in the section of Romans that Marleene has read, Paul goes on to argue that in Christ, all of this has changed. By offering up his perfect flesh on the cross, by dying for us, we have been born in the spirit. We have been freed. The law of the spirit is now fully operational in us. We have become new Adam and Eves, in which another spirit has penetrated, dwelling within us. We walk in the Spirit.

With Paul, the spirit-flesh dualism we can see throughout the Bible becomes a real obsession. I wonder how you have reacted to Paul's understanding of how you are made? In talking to Sheila and Marleene about how they felt when reading these passages, I got the sense that they felt squirmy. And when I cheerily told Bill what I was going to talk about today, he looked a little uncomfortable as well. Certainly with me, when I read Paul, and start wondering about the thing he hates that the law of his flesh keeps insisting that he do, I start to feel a tad uneasy. Is Paul talking about some sort of involuntary sexual desire? I wonder. Does he have a crazy gluttonous craving for ice cream in the middle of the night? Does he suffer from cupidity? Does he hoard? Does he take a little from the offering plate every time he preaches, and keep it hidden until no one is watching, and then take it out, cravenly holding each piece of gold and silver up to the sunlight, worshipping it as the only true God?

We will never know just what Paul's sin is, but we suspect what it might be. Scholars are pretty sure that when Paul leaves the Holy Land to preach to the gentiles, his encounter with the sexual mores of the Greco-Roman world – and in particular its sexual practices – shocked him. And, also attracted him. In Greco-Roman society every sexual act or partner or coupling was possible. There was little in the way of restriction. There was something Paul could freely do in that society that he could not do back in the Holy Land. And when Paul encountered this – particularly in Corinth – he seems to have really struggled. In Corinth, for example, the people understood themselves to have been saved by Jesus. And so, since they were saved, they believed they could do anything. They adopted Greco-Roman excesses, and took them to the extreme. That is certainly not what we want.

But I doubt if a truly shameful excess was what Paul wished to engage in. There was something small and private that he wanted to do, which he felt deeply ashamed of.

And this conflict haunted him. It ate away at him. It made him feel dirty, and contemptible. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, Paul has a great shameful need to cover himself. And so, he takes refuge in the spirit.

How does this make you feel? Have you ever taken refuge in the spirit?

Does it make you feel a little sad? Do you wonder if Paul should maybe have given into his urges, or explored them at least? Perhaps the sin he was so afraid of was simply love.

There is a part of me, I know, that wants to challenge Paul. "What is so bad about your desire?" I want to ask him. Are you sure that what you are so ashamed about, this fleshly desire, is really a sin – or is it instead something that society, not God, is telling you is wrong? Is your refusal to pursue your natural inclination, actually a refusal to enjoy the wonderful way that you are made? Could you be denying your nature? In your crazy insistence on flesh bad, spirit good, can you be forgetting the other creation story too much – God sees you, and you are truly and wonderfully made? You are good.

Certainly, this is the danger that Paul, and people who take Paul's rabid dualism to extremes, can run into. It is the opposite of the problem in Corinth. In that case people lived too much. In Paul's way, people lived too little. And yet, this small way, has been the way which for years, the church has tried to encourage us to live our lives.

There is a story that James Joyce used to tell, for instance, of how as a young boy, the monks at his school in Ireland used to give each boy a caramel, by asking each boy to stick his tongue out, and then placing the caramel on each boy's tongue. After this was done, the monks would ask the boys to close their mouths. "No chewing," they would warn. Then the monks would consult the clock on the wall of the classroom. After two minutes, the monks would ring a hand bell, and tell the boys to spit out their caramels, because, as the monks admonished them, "the

pleasures of the flesh were suspect, and they did not want the boys to fall into sin, and in so doing lose their immortal souls.”

This is a funny story. Sort of. But it still makes us squirm, doesn't it? There is something just so wrong with it on so many levels. What's so wrong about enjoying a sweet taste? What's so wrong about joy?

This 'funny' forces us to ask ourselves how many joys we may have denied ourselves and others because we think there is something shameful and risky about them.

It is interesting, but in our reading from Matthew today, Jesus tells us the Parable of the Sower. Certainly the way that we understand this parable can involve some dualism and separation of spirit and flesh. The seed is what is spiritual. The earth is what is flesh. And yet this story is also about recreation, is all about the merger of the spiritual with the earth. The seed needs the earth. It needs the rain. It needs the sun. It needs shelter. And the seed needs someone to sow it. It can't do it on its own. And when you think about it, what exactly is so spiritual about the seed? It is a thing, just like the earth, and the sun, and the birds that eat it, and the thorns who invade it. It is just as much a thing as the sowers themselves. And certainly the sowers are spiritual.

Of course the seed is spiritual because it is a thing which also is miraculous. Because it is a thing which can grow and develop and bear fruit, and feed and nourish others. It is a thing, in which that which is spiritual cannot be removed. The spiritual is part and parcel with the way that it is made.

Where do you fall on this spectrum of thought?

Which view of human nature comforts you? What makes bearing fruit and contributing to society, and makes life worth living to you?

Are you a being made up of spirit and flesh constantly at war with yourself?

Or are you truly and wonderfully made?

Can you see, as Teilhard de Chardin once wrote, and as many theologians are coming to see, that there is neither spirit nor matter in the world. That the stuff of the universe is spirit-matter. No other substance but this could have produced the human molecule.

In our flesh – in the Jewish understanding – in the flesh that Job asserts he will stand and see his maker at the end of his days – our being is woven like a golden thread.

Thanks be to God.