

## Authentic Human Flourishing

**Ps 15 & Romans 8:1-17 – Sermon Text = Romans 8:6  
387, 436, 411, 654**

*To set the mind on flesh is death,  
but to set the mind on the Spirit  
is life and peace.  
(Rom 8:6)*

We are not used to dealing with stark, either/or choices  
like Paul presents to the Roman Christians.

For Paul, it's 'flesh' or 'Spirit,'  
death or life and peace.

That's not the world we live in.

Ours is a culture of multiple choice.

You can get connected through Telus, Bell, or Rogers,  
to simply name the big three.

Once connected, you can choose from thousands of channels of TV,  
hundreds of movies on Netflix,  
millions of songs.

You can choose from multiple brands of almost any product you want.

And billions of dollars are spent every year  
to influence your choices about what you do with your resources.

Into this world of endless choice, then,  
come Paul's words about **the** choice faced by his readers and their neighbours,  
then and now.

For Paul, 'flesh' and 'Spirit' are stark, polar opposites.  
They represent dark and light, evil and good, death and life.

One can imagine, in the back of his mind as he wrote this section,  
the words of the 30<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy,  
a part of the Jewish tradition that was well known throughout the community.

*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ...  
I call heaven and earth to witness against you today  
that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.  
Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,  
loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him,  
for that means life to you ...  
(Deut 30:15 & 19-20a)*

Now, Deuteronomy was a great summary  
of the stories of God's deliverance  
and of the obedience Israel was invited to return to God  
in gratitude for that liberating grace.  
Abundant life, for the Deuteronomist, consists of  
"loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him."

The current form of the book was probably compiled  
in the period when Israel returned from exile,  
during the reign of the reforming king, Josiah, from 641-609 BC.  
It was intended to re-establish Israel's code for living together  
as emissaries of God's mission in the world  
after a time of extreme threat, fear, and suffering.

It summarizes God's will for living together with a purpose,  
and, as such, plays a seminal role in Jewish piety and life.

Paul, as a zealous Shammaite Pharisee,  
would have been steeped in its teachings.

Within the Judaism of his time,

Paul stood for a prophetic and democratic interpretation of the Law,  
believing that God has granted wisdom to the whole people of God,  
not simply a priestly elite.

He would have held to the wisdom of Deuteronomy with great devotion,  
with one crucial exception.

God had revealed, through his encounter with the risen Christ,  
that in Jesus of Nazareth,  
this God who had created all that is,  
had fulfilled his promise of abundant, flourishing life  
by expanding the appointment of the agents of that life  
to all of humanity.

All humanity, as envisioned in the covenant with Abraham,  
were now God's agents of blessing in the world.

To understand the significance of this passage for us today,  
here at Brentwood,  
as we seek be the community  
that serves God's mission in this world of ours,  
filled as it is with bewildering choices,  
we have to be grasped by the power and purpose  
of this stark choice Paul presents.

I've been exploring this death and life choice lately  
in terms of dark and light.

You'll remember that I am reading a book each month  
that friends have suggested are Christian classics of the twentieth century.

My book for August is Frederick Buechner's *The Hungering Dark* (1969).  
The section I read on Monday morning was called 'Come and See.'  
It was about Christmas and summarized those events in these wonderful words –

*Then, as the Gospels picture it, all heaven broke loose.*  
(p 51)

What a provocative phrase – 'all heaven broke loose.'  
What happens when all heaven breaks loose in Jesus Christ  
is that people begin to know and enjoy  
a new and transformative depth of authentic human flourishing.  
The light of God shines into the darkness of human existence,  
a darkness where, as many have put it over the ages, 'all hell has broken loose.'

This is what Paul is encouraging the Roman Christians to see and do.  
If your mind is set on 'the flesh,'  
on the darkness of paganism or the Jewish law as imposed in his day,  
on one of those forms of the old way of seeing things,  
then you will continue to nurture death.  
You will continue to wither as authentic human beings,  
finding meaning for your life in false gods or rules of purity  
that cannot deliver the goods of a flourishing life.  
You will find your basic needs for security, acceptance, and power  
met in ways that lead further into the darkensses of death.

Buechner has a wonderful description of those darkensses.  
He is reflecting on Isaiah's promise  
that the people who walk in darkness will see a great light.

*If darkness is meant to suggest a world where nobody can see very well –  
either themselves, or each other, or even where they are standing at the moment;  
if darkness is meant to convey a sense of uncertainty,  
of being lost, of being afraid;  
if darkness suggests conflict,  
conflict between races, between nations,  
between individuals each pretty much out for himself when you come right down to it;  
then we live in a world that knows much about darkness.*  
(p 50)

For Paul, that core promise of God in Isaiah is fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ.  
As John says in the prologue to his gospel,  
the light of reconciliation with God came into the world in Jesus Christ,  
event though the world is having trouble recognizing that.  
And that light will never be extinguished.  
Once it has shined, nothing will separate God from us.  
That is the reality we live in now and forever.

So, what tips for authentic human flourishing  
emerge from our reflections this morning?

First, it's all about the quality of the relationships –  
with God, with others, and with yourself.  
Flourishing life comes from being at peace  
in those relationships.

First and foremost, that is a gift of God to be accepted.  
There are no conditions.  
to riff a bit on the Nike tag line, 'Just Accept It.'

Second, to enjoy the acceptance of the gift takes work.  
It's the work of gratitude, and a true joy,  
but it is work.

It means developing the disciplines  
that the Christian community has nurtured since the days of Paul –  
worship, learning, fellowship, and service.

The Biblical take on peace – *shalom* –  
means participating in the well-being of the world.  
Another way of thinking about this calling  
is being a blessing in all that you do.  
That's what comes from choosing life and peace.

Finally, for this morning anyway,  
being fruitful in that work  
depends on where you decide to focus your energy.  
God is always present, even in the situations that seem the darkest.  
That is the core promise of the Scriptures.

"Fear not, for I am with you."

No power in all of creation, Paul was convinced,  
can separate us from the love of God.

So, focus on that reality, no matter what is happening.  
That focus is sharpened through the disciplines we just mentioned –  
worship, learning, fellowship, and service.

And out of those disciplines grows an enriched life and peace.

May God guide us through his generous grace this week  
to step further into the core choice of life and peace  
that he offers so freely and so faithfully.