

April 2, 2017
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

37:1-14 Ezekiel
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Romans, chapter 8, verse 6: “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

As you hear it, does this verse offer comfort, or curse?

You may be wondering where I'm going today if I'm beginning with Romans. After all, the long readings from Ezekiel and John are beautiful and beloved, rich like heavy cream, both as scripture and as literature.

In contrast, this reading from Paul, and the whole of Romans 8, is troubling and troublesome. I'm starting there because it gives me another opportunity to explore my turbulent relationship with Paul. Our relationship is turbulent because many of Paul's writings, including Romans 8, have been used as weapons against boundary-pushers of various varieties. Some of the main targets have been gay and lesbian people.

I had a very personal experience with that during the summer of 2005. To put things in perspective, at that time the Episcopal Church was dealing with fallout from the ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson. Concurrently, this congregation was dealing with fallout from its decision, announced in January of that year, to suspend all marriages until same-sex couples could be married. Around the Episcopal Church, there was conflict and uncertainty.

I was in seminary, and that summer I attended a weeklong preaching training conference with about a hundred Episcopal seminarians from around the country. Each student was assigned to a small group of ten students and two faculty members. Each student preached to the members of their group, who offered feedback afterwards. During my introductory group meeting, a gay man and I outed ourselves. Previous experience had taught me to come out before anyone had the chance inadvertently to say something hurtful.

In this case, my strategy failed. Despite knowing that we were in the room, or more likely because of it, one student used today's part of Romans 8 as the basis for his sermon. His message was this: “practicing homosexuals” can't become sanctified—that is, they can't grow in holiness—and therefore can't go to heaven. I knew going in that some students might feel that way and might even say so. I was not prepared for it to be expressed during a homily, a situation in which I was expected to sit and listen. While I sat and listened, I wept. During the feedback period I gathered myself and calmly asked, “Who was the intended audience for your sermon?” He looked me in the directly in eye and said, “I wrote it for you.” I wish I'd come up with a snarky but clever reply, but I was too upset for that. I agreed with nothing that student said, and yet his words left me feeling angry and sad and unmoored.

While that incident was painful, it was mild on the spectrum of things that still happen to gay people in the name of Christianity. Fortunately, since then, that student's mindset has become much less prevalent in the Episcopal Church. But fundamentalist churches still use Romans 8 to justify their vitriol and violence against gay people. Fundamentalist churches *have* changed with the times, not theologically, but in adding transgender people to the targets on their radar screens. Such attitudes are probably more common than you think, even in Connecticut. There is a bill in the state legislature right now that would ban conversion therapy for minors. If you haven't heard of it, conversion therapy is purported to change people from gay to straight. Christians are the ones responsible for its propagation. Conversion therapy has been proven a sham, but no matter. It's sad to imagine that such legislation is necessary anywhere, but especially here and now.

Integrity is a national Episcopal organization that for over four decades has advocated for the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the life of the church. It has been enormously successful. We're beginning the work of starting a chapter here. One reason is because students come to New Haven from all over, and some struggle to reconcile their Christianity and their queerness. Those who grew up in problematic churches are likely also to have problematic parents, parents whose reactions can range from blind denial to open hostility. In keeping with its prophetic history, this congregation has abundant gifts to offer these young adults.

With all that said, I don't mean this to be a "gay" sermon. The gay part is a relevant illustration, one that I can employ with some familiarity. What I'm really getting at is the human impulse to separate, by standards perceived or real. There is typically an "in" group, which necessitates that there also be an "out" group. The "in" group gets to decide who belongs where and even gets to police the boundaries. This is important, because, if the wrong people get "in," the entire group is at risk.

Sadly, Christian communities are not immune to this impulse. In fact, they are some of the worst offenders, because the issue for them is bigger than the and now, bigger even than simple life and death. It's about eternity, and the prospect of salvation versus damnation. To avoid damnation, the gathered Christian body must remain pure, so its members must be pure. If the wrong people get in, the entire community is at risk of damnation.

Matters of the human body have long been factors in Christian group-membership calculations. For example, dark skin and physical disability have been used as separators. But concerns about sex and sexuality are perhaps the most fraught and therefore the most powerful. From the women healers burned at the stake for witchcraft during the Middle Ages, there's a dotted line to the murdered black transwomen of right now. Many people have been injured, physically and spiritually, by those who claim to be representing God.

There is, of course, a different perspective, and it's pretty simple: Jesus says that the greatest commandment is love, so love is always the most important imperative; Jesus says that he is the fulfilment of the law, so purity is a false idol to which love should never be sacrificed. One might even say that anything other than love is sinful.

I like to think that Paul understood this: after all, Paul the Pharisee changed when he became Paul the Apostle. Taking a giant leap away from the fundamentalism of his place and time, he surrendered traditional practices that were important within the Jewish community, but boundaries to others—for example, rules regarding food and circumcision. Remember, Paul wrote each of his major letters to a particular young community of Jesus-followers, in response to the particular circumstances in that community. In light of the realities at hand, he adjusted, honing in on the essentials. For you seminary geeks out there, I'll say that Paul was not *arguing* systematic *theology*; rather, he was *doing* contextual *ministry*.

Paul got at least one thing wrong: like the other believers, he thought Jesus was coming right back. The end time was just over the horizon, so Paul was making short-term plans. Of course, more than two thousand years later, we're still waiting. If Paul was still alive today, I believe his goal would still be practical advice in response to the real events playing out in actual Christian communities. And I don't imagine he would ever revert, to purity at the expense of love.

I want to get back to Romans 8 and flesh versus spirit. Much of Christianity over time and even today sees the human body as suspicious. Bodies became so often the source of shame and the object of blame. Suspicion of the body was and is used to justify separation and control and punishment. These attitudes are entrenched even in secular settings. As we seek ways to reconcile all that, we might notice that God doesn't seem to be body-suspicious. God gave humans physical life in the first place, by putting flesh on bones and breath in lungs. God hasn't stopped doing so.

When Jesus arrives at Bethany, he doesn't just brush off the grieving Martha and Mary by saying, "At least he's in a better place." Instead Jesus brings Lazarus back, not just in spirit but also in body, thereby affirming the value of his bodily presence. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus doesn't distance himself from women or from the disabled or from those who are racially or ethnically different. He does quite the opposite. And while we're at it, let's also note the obvious: Jesus himself is God embodied. Jesus needs his body to walk and to heal and to teach. God needs our bodies, too.

Maybe that's a hint to us about what Paul might really be saying when he juxtaposes flesh and spirit. We are embodied, *and* we have choices. We get to choose whether to use our bodies for sowing conflict or peace, for bringing hurt or healing, for carrying hate or love. It's not about following the rules in order to get into heaven. It's about choosing to offer our embodied lives not with individual selfishness in search of fleeting gratification, but rather in the enactment of relational compassion and sustaining generosity.

Damnation be damned: salvation will take care of itself, because nothing is beyond God's power of reconciliation and redemption. So don't fret about that. Be true to who you are, confident that God gave *you* the *gifts* of flesh and breath, *and* God gave you the ability to discern the path down which *you* will find holiness. With God's grace, we will grow in sanctification as we live and breathe, walking through this world as embodied agents of peace, and healing, and love.