

Sermon 9 Pentecost Year A (Proper 10)

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St. John's Episcopal Church

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Psychologists teach that as human beings grow up and grow older they move through life stages, with varying developmental tasks. Our littlest children face the job of learning that their mothers will not automatically recognize and meet their every need. Elementary age kids are in the process of learning how to obey the basic rules of school and home, to become somewhat civilized. And adolescents are struggling, often rather noisily, with the profound task of figuring out their fundamental identity – ‘who am I; where do I belong; what am I all about?’ When life shoots us out the other end of this cascade of becoming, we’re married, done with school, working at our chosen jobs and everything is settled.

Except, of course, that it’s not. While psychologists used to focus their study on the first 25 years of development, it turns out that our work of becoming truly human is a life-long quest, one which never stops - unless we intentionally turn it off, let ourselves become rigid and begin to die – which some people start doing by the time they’re 40. Those bothersome questions of ‘who am I *really*, and where is my true home,” are never fully answered in this mortal life. But staying with the questions, or not, defines our journey. The difficulty is knowing how to look for possible answers, or at least directions we might travel. And Christianity has some profoundly important things to teach us about this pilgrimage of identity. It is what Paul is talking about in today’s lesson from Romans.

It’s not easy for us to see meaning in these words, because language about being ‘in the flesh’ or being ‘in the Spirit’ doesn’t exactly match up with any of our 21<sup>st</sup> century concepts. We imagine that by ‘flesh’ Paul is referring to our human bodies and the things associated with it – like eating and drinking and especially sex. Because we all know that Paul was obsessed with sex. (Not true, actually.) And for us, Spirit suggests our conscience and being good people. Nor is it obvious to us what it means to ‘set the mind on’ one or the other of these. It sounds a bit like setting your radio to AM or FM.

But Paul is not using these words to talk about two parts of our human nature, like body and soul. Rather, he is saying that these are two possible ways of living life, pointing us in two radically different directions. The flesh refers to the systems and priorities by which our lives are focused at the core on ourselves, our egos, our personal needs. The Spirit refers to the Spirit of God, to be centered on discovering God's will for us.

When Paul talks of centering a life in the Spirit, he is not talking of cleaning up this or that problem behavior, making an improvement here, an adjustment there. As Richard Foster writes, "God is not trying to improve us but to transform us. We are prone to settle for so much less than God desires for us. We are glad enough for God to remove some irritating behavior from our personality, or some destructive addiction, but it is a very different thing when God begins a fundamental restructuring of our affections."

Very different, indeed! At that point, we often shy away, not so sure we want something that radical going on in our lives. "Can't I do some of the flesh and a bit of the Spirit? Why does it have to be either/or?" It makes me think of the alcoholic patients I see at the hospital. I explain to them that because of their depression, or their failing liver, or the damage to their brain they need to completely stop drinking. And I can see them flinching away from this prescription. What I commonly hear is, "I really get it now that I need to control my drinking, to cut back. I'm sure I can do that." Except it doesn't work, because the center in alcohol is too powerful to be compromised. They don't need to have their drinking improved. They need to be transformed into real abstinence.

It is the same with the fundamental 'setting' of our lives. If we try to have some of both sides, the pull of the flesh will not let us move toward setting our minds on the Spirit. Paul talks here about these choices as being between life and death, but that does not mean whether or not we want to go to heaven when we die. Instead, this is a choice of living or not right here and now.

It is at its heart a choice of how to answer those human life questions: "Who am I? Where do I belong?" The call to live in the Spirit is a call to identity, to remember who we are and to discover who we are called to be. To be spiritual is to know and to live as though there is more to life than meets the eye. It also means to discover that there is more to each one of us than meets the eye, more than we see about our own selves.

Every other year we send our young adults on a pilgrimage, a journey which they choose and work out, one which they need to prepare for and then

complete. They've gone to Spain to walk the Camino de Santiago, to Ireland to explore the thin places there, and I don't know what's coming this next year. What's clear about the pilgrimage, other than the huge amount of work and preparation required, is that this is not just a way of visiting interesting places. Those who journey are looking to find more of who they, themselves, are, at a deeper level than they might have considered previously. It's a way of finding other names for their identities, glimpses of possible futures to which they might be carried by their discoveries. In fact, the church in the middle ages began to strongly encourage pilgrimage because it was a way of teaching the faithful, who usually did not have the skills of reading and writing, about God and about themselves, about what faith could mean and require of them.

As a congregation, we believe that pilgrimage is an important and formative experience in the lives of our young people. But I would suggest to you that it is, for all of us, a model for the journey of our entire lives. When we center in the life of the Spirit, we are longing to discover who we truly are in God's sight. What is the deep name by which God knows me? How does God become present to me, and who do I become when I let myself see this? To live into these questions is to undertake the treasure hunt for the glory we are intended to be.

We live in a world which is only too happy to tell us what our identity is. You are a consumer; you are a voter; you are a worker bee, who had better keep moving fast so the machine doesn't run you down. You are a success or a failure as defined by these questions. This identity of the flesh is constantly before us, shouting loudly, undermining any sense that we could make other choices.

But does it satisfy? Does this kind of readily available identity satisfy our deep need to be truly human? C. S. Lewis said, "Our God finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Pleased, but not truly fulfilled, not knowing ourselves as we really are. We were brought forth in order to become creatures filled with the glory of our identity in God, pleased with ourselves at a deep level, and pleased to dwell in God's Spirit. This is the word spoken to us here in the worshiping community, which can shape and support our Christian journey. Here we are given the offer

of our lifetimes, the call to live as though we are more than we can see. Here we are joined together in the pilgrimage community, until at last God brings us home to the place where we fully know and are fully known.