Sermon preached by

The Reverend Hope H. Eakins

at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, New Britain, Connecticut

on July 23, 2017, Proper 11, Year A

For many weeks now we have been hearing Epistles from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, a letter widely regarded as Paul’s masterpiece. Martin Luther praised *Romans* as “the most important book in the New Testament,”… “the purest Gospel…worth a Christian’s memorizing it word for word.” That may be true, but I can’t help noting a certain befuddlement and a glazing over of the eyes as this Epistle has been read? What is Paul talking about? What does he mean when he contrasts living according to the Spirit, and living according to the flesh, living by a spirit of slavery and living by a spirit of adoption? And what do these distinctions have to do with us?

Let me begin with the story of a woman I met when I was a newly ordained priest. Marian, I’ll call her, signed a visitor’s card one Sunday indicating she’d like a home visit from one of the clergy. I made the call and learned much about Marian’s life and the man whose recent death she was grieving. She had fallen deeply in love with this man some thirty years before. He was considerably older and he was divorced. Both were Roman Catholics and knew they could never be married in their church so they would have to live in sin. They plunged ahead anyway and moved in together in spite of the objections of their family and friends. Marian stopped going to Mass because she couldn’t face her guilt. But when the man suddenly died and Marian was all alone, she decided to go to church again, to the Episcopal Church, where she had heard she might be welcome. And she was. Marian thanked me for visiting, handed me a donation, asked for a box of offering envelopes, and told me why she had requested a call: she had colon cancer. So I kept on visiting her before her surgery and during her recuperation, assuring her of God’s presence and love. But when I invited her to receive Holy Communion, Marian said she wasn’t ready. I was surprised and even more surprised when Marian phoned the church office and said that she wanted to be removed from the parish mailing list. She was reluctant to speak with me when I called her back but finally she told me: the cost of her operation was far greater than she thought, and she could no longer afford to give any money, so she would have to leave the church. I told her that God’s love is free and abundant and had nothing to do with her gifts. But Marian could not understand or would not believe what I said and insisted on ending her relationship with the church until she could pay her way once more. I never saw her again.

Marian is the sort of person St. Paul has in mind when he speaks about those whose relationship to God is led by a spirit of slavery. Ancient Rome was full of slaves. Slaves had no rights at all; they were property, and in Roman law, seen to be the equivalent of animals. Slaves lived in fear. Those with bad masters were afraid of what might happen to them if they did not give satisfaction; those with good masters were afraid of what might happen if their master died or sold them to someone else. Paul urges the Christians of Rome not to be led by the spirit of slavery, the spirit of fear, in their relationship with God. Paul warns Christians not to live life like Marian, always wondering if you measure up to God’s requirements, always feeling as if you have to do something to earn God’s favor, like giving money, always being afraid that in the end, you might be rejected as not good enough.

What Paul wants for Christians in Rome is to live not according to the flesh but according to God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit inspires confidence, not fear; the sense of being God’s beloved children, not slaves. God’s Spirit fills us so that we can address God not just as Lord or Master but as “Abba, Father.” This is the affectionate, trusting way of speaking to God that Jesus taught in the *Our Father*. And if God is our daddy, for that is what Abba means, then we are God’s children and God’s heirs. The contrast between the two relationships with God - slaves, with all of their fear and uncertainty and children, with all their confidence and privileged status - could not be greater.

St. Paul speaks passionately about the two ways of living, flesh and spirit, slaves and children, because of his own personal experience. Paul was born as Saul into a devout Jewish family. His parents were Pharisees, ardent keepers of God’s law, and Saul followed their strict adherence to all the rules in the Torah. As a boy he went off to Jerusalem to study at the feet of Gamaliel, the greatest rabbi of the time and so zealous was Saul, that when the followers of Jesus began proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead, Saul began to persecute the Christians who were preaching this heresy. He did so until a blaze of light knocked him flat on his face in the dust, and a voice called him by name. “Saul,” it said, “Saul, why are you out to persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” asked Saul. And the voice answered, “I am Jesus of Nazareth.” Then instead of pronouncing judgment on Saul, Jesus invited Saul to join his team and preach the Good News to the whole world. Saul rose and did as Jesus had commanded. He was baptized with a new name, Paul, and began the great mission that took the rest of his life. Everything Paul ever said or did from that day forward was an attempt to bowl over the human race as he had been bowled over himself while he lay there in the dust of the Damascus Road.

Grace, God’s unmerited favor, became Paul’s theme, and he proclaimed it wherever he went. Life, says Paul, is not about striving to earn God’s approval by being good, like a slave anxiously trying to please a master. Life is about knowing how much God loves us, loves us so much that God would send his Son to die for us. God’s love is Jesus saying, “Father, forgive” while hanging on the cross. God’s love is Jesus calling Saul to be an apostle even while Saul was going hell-bent in the opposite direction. And true life is about knowing God’s love and living in the spirit of that love, living with the confidence that is the birthright of God’s children.

So what does all this have to do with us today? A great deal, I think. I don’t know about you but I don’t want to live like Marian, wondering if I’ve pledged enough money to get myself into heaven. I don’t want to live by the flesh, thinking that this is all there is, and I’m the one in charge of it all. I don’t want to live like a Pharisee, asking how late I can get to church and how early I can leave and still have it “count.” I don’t want to put my trust in a God who makes a list and checks it twice to find out who’s naughty or nice.

Paul tells us that there is another way to live, that God’s grace is a gift that can transform us. Sin is slavery that holds us back, says Paul, and grace frees us from that slavery to rise to new life and live as God’s beloved children, following the Law not to earn God’s love but to show our love to God who first loves us. God’s Word has been spoken in Jesus and it has not failed, it just hasn’t all happened yet, we are in the between-time, waiting for the redemption of the world. What is different about waiting with grace is that we live with hope, seeing the suffering of the world as birth pangs of the new world that is about to dawn.

Knowing that we have enough, we can share what we have. Knowing that peace is the only way we can live together, we can wage love not war. Knowing that there are no such thing as alternative facts we hold fast to truth. We can do these things because the Spirit is at work within us, Paul says, and he wants us to believe it because he believed it and that made all the difference in the world.