

July 28, 2019
The Prerogative of God
Annette Hill Briggs
Romans 8:1-17

8 *If you belong to Christ Jesus, you won't be punished. ² The Holy Spirit will give you life that comes from Christ Jesus and will set you free from sin and death. ³ The Law of Moses cannot do this, because our selfish desires make the Law weak. But God set you free when he sent his own Son to be like us sinners and to be a sacrifice for our sin. God used Christ's body to condemn sin. ⁴ He did this, so that we would do what the Law commands by obeying the Spirit instead of our own desires.*

⁵ *People who are ruled by their desires think only of themselves. Everyone who is ruled by the Holy Spirit thinks about spiritual things. ⁶ If our minds are ruled by our desires, we will die. But if our minds are ruled by the Spirit, we will have life and peace. ⁷ Our desires fight against God, because they do not and cannot obey God's laws. ⁸ If we follow our desires, we cannot please God.*

⁹ *You are no longer ruled by your desires, but by God's Spirit, who lives in you. People who don't have the Spirit of Christ in them don't belong to him. ¹⁰ But Christ lives in you. So you are alive because God has accepted you, even though your bodies must die because of your sins. ¹¹ Yet God raised Jesus to life! God's Spirit now lives in you, and he will raise you to life by his Spirit.*

¹² *My dear friends, we must not live to satisfy our desires. ¹³ If you do, you will die. But you will live, if by the help of God's Spirit you say "No" to your desires. ¹⁴ Only those people who are led by God's Spirit are his children. ¹⁵ God's Spirit doesn't make us slaves who are afraid of him. Instead, we become his children and call him our Father. ¹⁶ God's Spirit makes us sure that we are his children. ¹⁷ His Spirit lets us know that together with Christ we will be given what God has promised. We will also share in the glory of Christ, because we have suffered with him.*

[Contemporary English Version]

Remember Jesus's parable of the father with two sons? It's a practically perfect picture of Paul's teaching in Romans 8 – a father, who embodies this life in the Spirit Paul describes, and two sons, both living according to the flesh: the younger one training at life in the flesh like it's an Olympic sport; the older one pacing himself more. But make no mistake: he is just as much living in the flesh as his little brother, but with none of the fun. He is bitter as a too-green persimmon, biting his tongue to the very end, when he walks up onto that party the day his brother came home and all that seething resentment comes pouring out of him.

At the end is when the younger son wakes up to the fact that he's already dead. Dead a son as he is, the younger one knows his father, or thinks he does. *I am dead to him as a son, but I can still go back as a slave*, he tells himself, while his brother never thought himself anything other than a slave – muscle and breath born to do the master's bidding.

People living in the spirit don't know a difference between slaves and sons. There are only children, as Paul says in verse 16, children of God. Paul says the same in his letter to Philemon, which Sarah read and which I'll preach after I return from my trip this fall. Romans *will* end someday.

Children of God know who we are and we know whose we are. We know, as Richard Rohr writes, that *we are not punished for our sins. We are punished by our sins*. To live in the Spirit is to live inside the reality of a certain kinship, a connection between ourselves and the creator of all that lives and breathes and has being. In speaking of the Human-God relationship, Child-Parent is both the best and still far too small a metaphor for describing it – which makes it not useful for everyone, and for some too horrifying to consider. For some, brother-sister or friend-friend or student-teacher works better, because their in-the-flesh experience with a parent-child relationship is just too damaged, too frightening a metaphor to use in imagining how God loves us.

To live in the flesh is, simply, to live outside the reality of that kinship; to choose, by default or design, to trust only that which the eyes and ears can see and hear, what the physical senses can touch and confirm. Which is actually very little when you think about it, isn't it? We order our days on a great deal more than what we confirm with our senses moment by moment, don't we? I don't inspect my car for safety every time I jump in to drive somewhere. I don't test the sturdiness of every chair I sit in, the sanitation of every spoon that goes in my mouth. We trust lots and lots of things, day in and out.

How do we confirm the truth of the Spirit of God? the truth of our preciousness to God? the truth about how very, very loved we are? the truth about the persistence of that love, regardless of our resistance to it? Simply, friends, by living as if it is true. The same way we sit on chairs and drive cars we don't test first. Just moving into the reality and discovering that in fact it does hold us up. To live in the flesh is to believe anything other than that we are precious to God – and then behave that way. To mistreat this life, this body, other people, this creation, is to disbelieve in our own preciousness, to believe it possible for anything to interrupt or disrupt or muck up that preciousness.

Because we can't. We cannot ruin the preciousness. Nothing we have done, nothing we might ever do, can change it. It is not ours to change, the truth of our belovedness, the truth of our value. It is a God-made truth, cosmic truth, not of this world. Human beings have too much self-interest ever to think up such an idea. Doesn't keep us – both human beings and the church – from trying to remake this preciousness, this belovedness, in our

own image – the image of our need to feel worthy. So we make divine belovedness something to be earned, rather than assumed.

I remember when I had my first baby, and we got all these sweet baby onesies and sleepers for her. They were so soft and cozy, and I wondered *Why can't grown-up clothes be as soft and comfortable as baby clothes?* Everything has to be a little bit tight, a little bit scratchy, and also pinch our toes, or we aren't dressed appropriately. Have we done the same with faith? Created an environment in which if we aren't slightly tormented we aren't sure God loves us? What if – just imagine this for a moment with me – what if what God wants most for each of us, and for all creation, is that we be happy, safe and loved?

Or even better, imagine this: what if what God wants most for each of us sentient beings is that we know we are to be happy, safe and loved? what if we need not feel guilty or ashamed for wanting it, because in wanting it for ourselves we agree with God that the very best life for us is one in which we are happy, safe and loved? *It's God's prerogative, don't you think,* Susanne P. said this week in Bible study, *to decide what God wants for God's children?* One of those questions that answers itself.

If God wants to regard us as children instead of slaves, isn't that God's prerogative? If God should choose to love us without even the threat of punishment for our sorry ways, toward ourselves, toward each other, toward the planet, and toward God's own self too, who are we to say God can't or shouldn't? God does not love us because we are good. God loves us – why, friends? – God loves us because God is good. And insofar as we can take that in, the God-given happiness already saturating nature will seep and soak and transform our grief and fear as well.

There is no straight or easy path between life according to the flesh and life in the Spirit. Rather, it's an invitation we accept, or not, in the everydayness of being human. Life in the flesh is exactly that: faith in human flesh to save itself. Which, stated that way, we know, is absurd. Flesh is forever dying and cannot save itself. And yet, and yet, the trickery never stops, does it? The compulsion to believe what is before our eyes in the moments when we are hurting or afraid? The anxiety and the want for immediate relief, combined with brain and body chemistry like dopamine and adrenaline, how are we not going to be drawn away from the Spirit?

But the Spirit doesn't beg; she only waits, like the father on his front porch in Jesus's parable, waiting for his kids to come home to him. She doesn't scold or fuss or harass us out of bed. She waits, and she waits, and she waits. There's no amount of time she will not wait, for us to realize we've been in her lap all along. And when we do, friends, when we do, the kind of life we'll have – I expect we cannot even imagine the kind of life together we shall have, my goodness!

For the last, some lyrics from a Mary Chapin Carpenter song, an old one but still my most favorite of hers, called "Jubilee." What she names "jubilee" I think of as this Spirit of God always here among us, around us, and within us.

*I can tell by the way you're walking You don't want company
I'll let you alone and I'll let you walk on And in your own good time you'll be
Back where the sun can find you Under the wise wishing tree
And with all of them made we'll lie under the shade And call it a jubilee.*

*And I can tell by the way you're talking That the past isn't letting you go
But there's only so long you can take it all on And then the wrong's gotta be on its own
And when you're ready to leave it behind you You'll look back and all that you'll see
Is the wreckage and rust that you left in the dust On your way to the jubilee*

*And I can tell by the way you're listening That you're still expecting to hear
Your name being called like a summons to all
Who have failed to account for their doubts and their fears
They can't add up to much without you And so if it were up to me,
I'd take hold of your hand Saying come hear the band Play your song at the jubilee*

*And I can tell by the way you're searching For something you can't even name
That you haven't been able to come to the table Simply glad that you came
When you feel like this try to imagine That we're all like frail boats on the sea
Just scanning the night for that great guiding light Announcing the jubilee*

*And I can tell by the way you're standing With your eyes filling with tears
That it's habit alone that keeps you turning for home Even though your home is right here
Where the people who love you are gathered Under the wise wishing tree
May we all be considered then straight on delivered Down to the jubilee*

She calls it "jubilee." Paul calls it "life in the Spirit." Call it whatever you like. Just call it, friends, call it. Would you pray with me?