### Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

### Colossians 3:1-11

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

I’d like to talk about Paul’s letter this morning. I have struggled with Paul for more than 30 years. At times I find his writings inconsistent with the rest of scripture and at other times I simply don’t like his message. On rare occasions I have found him brilliant. I think it’s safe to say that at least some of his writings have not weathered the test of time very well. This isn’t to say Paul is wrong. It is to say, in places, like today’s reading, it isn’t readily apparent what Paul is trying to communicate. In fact, it’s easy to misunderstand him entirely.

This isn’t always the case. Sometimes it seems time has left Paul’s words untouched. For example in Corinthians Chapter 13 we find one of his gems that time has left untouched and I regularly use to guide my life. Paul says:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

When I evaluate my feelings of love for someone or something, or their love for me, Paul’s insights on ***love*** are ***spot on***. His words even shine a light on what others love, be it family, God, or country. Some can walk the walk of humble truth, selflessness, hope, and perseverance that Paul offers and others are all talk. And in Galatians Chapter 5, we learn the fruits of the Holy Spirit are: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* Where I find these fruits, I know the Holy Spirit is present. And where I find anger, anxiety, hate, impatience, mean-spiritedness, unfaithfulness, or no self-control, I know the Holy Spirit isn’t present.

2,000 years have passed since Paul wrote those words but these fruits are without a question just as relevant today as they were when he wrote them. They guide followers to what is holy and away from what is evil. Whether it’s my actions, someone else’s actions, or our government’s actions, I can always ask does it generate love, peace, and kindness or does it divide and create hostility? One of Paul’s gifts is being able to expertly articulate broad guiding principles.

So what is it that I find difficult with Paul and more specifically, what is difficult to understand in today’s reading? Today’s reading is a variation of one of my least favorite topics of his - the spirit vs flesh topic. The gist of these arguments, which are also found in Romans and Galatians, is the flesh is evil and the spirit is good. Today he says we are to put to death whatever is earthly in us. I don’t need to remind any of us that we are **very** earthly. I’m fond of my flesh and blood and try to take care of it and ***not*** put it to death. Moreover, today’s reading sounds more like a few rules rather than broad guiding principles. And like I just said, one of Paul’s gifts is being able to expertly articulate broad guiding principles. Has time altered Paul’s original intent? I think so.

If the spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, is right, and I think he probably is correct, most people who hear this reading think Paul is talking about sex. And when you hear Paul cautioning his readers to avoid fornication, passion, impurity and evil desire, it’s difficult to think he’s talking about anything else. But Rohr goes on to say,

I don’t think Paul ever intended for people to feel that their bodies are bad. After all, God took on a human body in Jesus! Paul does not use the word *soma,* which literally means “body.” He is trying to introduce another idea and unfortunately uses a word that has caused untold confusion in Christian history.

I agree with Rohr that Paul never intended for people to feel bad about their earthly bodies and his word choice has caused many centuries of confusion in Christian History. Rohr offers a rather detailed argument about the different Greek words that can be translated as body or flesh to reach his conclusion. I’ll spare you the lesson in Greek because I think there are more apparent ways to reach the same conclusion.

I think we’re all familiar with trying to understand a biblical text by first understanding the ancient social and political customs of the author. Sometimes this context can dramatically alter the meaning of a text. But sometimes we forget these same authors saw and understood the world around them without the knowledge and vocabulary we take for granted today. Take for example Sirach. In Sirach Chapter 3 he says:

My child, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if his mind fails, be patient with him;

Sirach didn’t know about dementia or Alzheimer but he had seen the minds of old men fail. He recognized when this happened, the father needed the support and patience of his children. In this case it’s easy to make the connection between Sirach’s observation that minds fail and dementia.

Paul (and for that matter all biblical authors) can only speak from the reference of their own time period. We’ve come a long way in science since the bible was written. I think Paul is facing the same dilemma as Sirach. He sees something and because he can’t name it, he describes it. However, unlike in Sirach’s case the connection between what Paul sees and our modern vocabulary isn’t as clear. After considering the rather lengthy description Paul gives of what he’s talking about, where he includes anger, wrath, greed, malice, slander, and passion, along with his lengthy description of sexual impurity and considering Richard Rohr’s analysis of the Greek, I think Paul is talking about human instinct, something we all have.

This instinct to which Paul refers means those feelings and emotions that happen spontaneously without conscious thought. It’s when someone says or does something and your mind instantly responds with hurt, anger, fear or other. We are born with most of these responses already in us, although a few may be learned at an early age. They are nature’s way of providing animals with protection against danger. However, these behaviors developed when people lived in caves and hunted for food or were hunted for food. In today’s more civilized society, our instincts can cause more problems than they solve.

Understood in this light, Paul isn’t saying the body is something to be ashamed of. That would contradict God who after creating humankind God saw humanity was not just good, like the rest of creation but we were ***very good***. God’s work isn’t something to be put to death. In this light, Paul’s words agree with and help flesh out the notion that we are created in God’s image and likeness. There is something ***very good*** in us which he calls spirit. If Paul were writing this passage today I think he would caution us to be mindful of our instincts and to consider where they are leading us. We are now clothed in Christ and when our instincts lead to anger, malice, lust, greed, fear, or aggressiveness they are unChristlike and not part of our spirit. We need to rise above our instincts and live in the spirit of the teachings of Jesus.

This text, instead of being a narrow list of sins to avoid, becomes a general guide about how to deal with instinctual responses, evaluate them, and act with your new self, the one that is clothed in Christ. It offers broad guidance in both everyday incidents, such as when we encounter a rude driver, an insult, or other slight where we might want to respond in kind, or worse, as well as guiding us in larger events we encounter.

A recent example that Paul could not have anticipated but that his words prepare us for can illustrate what I mean. This past month the KKK held a recruitment event at the Hanover County Courthouse. What is a Christian response? I know how I felt when I heard about this; anger and a touch of fear that the event could become like Charlottesville. Based on Facebook comments I know a lot of my friends had similar feelings but to the best of my knowledge no one gave in to their instinct to confront the KKK directly. Anger didn’t beget more anger and things didn’t escalate. Instead, mindful people considered the actions of the KKK and the inaction of the Board of Supervisors and chose to hold a well-publicized prayer vigil in the same location a few weeks later.

At one event, hateful bigoted instinct was on display and at the other event, peace, love, gentleness, and self-control were on exhibit. It is because of Paul’s gift for being able to articulate broad guiding principles that I know which group is following the Holy Spirit. Paul’s lesson for us may be a bit obscure at first but the message is as timely today as when he wrote it. Be aware of your instincts, put to death those instincts rooted in earthly desires, and respond with the Spirit; respond clothed in Christ.

+