

“NEARLY UNBELIEVABLE”

Romans 8:1-11 July 16th, 2017

Last Sunday’s message was from the seventh chapter of Romans where the apostle Paul cries out in anguish that which I want to do, I do not do, and that which I don’t want to do is precisely what I do because of the power of sin in me. What a miserable person I am. Romans 7:26 is the transitional verse into chapter eight. Who will help me to escape the bondage and power of sin in my life? “Thanks be to God for our Lord Jesus Christ.” So that message was a prelude for chapter eight.

Today we move into positive territory; we move into chapter eight. There is one word in this chapter that stands out prominently because it is used so many times. What word? The Spirit. The Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ. God’s Spirit. These words are all used interchangeably. When we get to chapter eight, it is as if Paul turns on the water faucet in the kitchen. No, we have to have more power than that. Paul opens up the fire hydrant and the water all gushes out. No, we have to have even more power than that. It is as if he releases the valve on a geyser in Yellowstone Park and the water starts gushing up into a high fountain. No, we have to have more power than that. Paul opens up all the flood gates that are located underneath the tallest dam in the world, and suddenly the water from the above reservoir rushes down through those flood gates and roars up with power, generating electricity for all electricity and lights. So also, suddenly, in chapter 8, Paul turns on the faucet, the hydrant, the valve, the flood gates, the power of the Holy Spirit. For the first seven chapters, there has been silence about the Holy Spirit. And then, in chapter eight, we hear twenty-one specific references to the Holy Spirit. Twenty-one times he directs our

attention to the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit for our lives.

The brief opening line of this eighth chapter of Romans is nearly unbelievable! “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v.1). Anyone who has lived has done things for which they deserve condemnation. Maybe “condemnation” is not a word we use, but surely “blame,” and “guilt” are words we use. We receive word that a member of the church, a friend, is sick, and we promise to hold him or her in our thoughts and prayers. Life gets hectic and days go by without our uttering a single prayer or even having a sympathetic thought of our sick friend. The next week in church, we learn during announcements that our friend’s health has worsened, and we wince at our own unfeeling, our failure to have allowed our friend’s illness even to pierce our consciousness. Now we pray, “O God, help me remember to prepare a casserole or at the very least to send a card.” If you are not guilty of a short-coming like this one, there are undoubtedly other actions for which you feel guilt. All of us are deserving of some condemnation.

The phrase by which we confess sin “by what we have done, and by what we have left undone” covers just about all the things for which we are deserving of condemnation. If there is a boatload of guilt for the things we have done, there is surely an ocean full of guilt for the things we have left undone.

So how are we to believe this nearly unbelievable thing—that there is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ? The key is perhaps found in the tiniest phrase “in Christ.” To be “in Christ” is categorically different from not to be “in Christ.” It is not simply a difference of degree, but a genuine difference of kind.

To be “in Christ” is to be a part of something far larger than ourselves. It is to encounter a power astronomically greater than the sum of all the willpower you have ever mustered, added to all the physical power you have ever exerted, added to all the clout you have ever had. Add all those up, and it is infinitesimal, compared to the power of God in Christ. There is a severe power shortage on our side. It is not that we are powerless, for surely we have the power to hurt others and ourselves, as well as to help others and ourselves. It is just that our power is so bound by our capacities, so limited by our perspectives, so tied to our situation. This may be what Paul means by the phrase “in the flesh.”

To be “in Christ” is to be swept up in the power of the Spirit and be free from what has bound us, limited us, tied us. To be “in Christ” is not the result of something we do; it is something God does for us. Paul is not pushing the reader to get his or her act together and get “in Christ.” Instead, he announces, he boldly proclaims: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit; since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (v. 9). This proclamation is the good news.

It is difficult to believe this good news, but it is not impossible to believe it. To believe it is to reorient our lives toward a power greater than us. Even more, it is to have our lives reoriented by a power greater than any other power we know in this world. Perhaps the greatest power we know in this world is the power of death, which ultimately conquers all of us and everyone we know. Death’s power is not simply at the moment of our dying; it is a power that creeps into our lives, our communities, and our bodies long before the moment we breathe our last.

Ask any alcoholic about the power of death, and if he or she can speak truth, the words will be about the living death they know. Ask any parent of a

child who is dying from a devastating disease, and you will hear of the power of death to break a heart even before the child's body gives up. However, even this power is not enough when compared to the power of "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead" (v.11).

In the concluding lines of this portion of Romans, Paul proclaims that this Spirit "will give life to your mortal bodies" (v. 11). By this Paul could mean that our bodies can get the air they need, the coursing blood required to keep them going, even the food and water to nourish them. Undoubtedly Paul means at least this; but there is most likely something more expressed here. Giving life to our mortal bodies is not simply giving them the essentials of bodily functions. It is to bring to our bodies, bound as they are to time and space, a power that is able to connect them to a movement of God's Spirit greater than ourselves.

This Spirit that we have "in Christ" is able to do so much more than we are able to do. On our own, we are not able to get it all done; so much is left undone. By this tiny phrase, "in Christ," Paul has said that we are not constrained by our limitations, shortcomings, failings; we are not even condemned by our cruelties, hurtful ways, hateful actions. Instead, we are free. *Free.*

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (v. 1) This freedom is nearly unbelievable, but not completely unbelievable. It is the freedom given to us to go beyond our limitations. It is the freedom of being part of God's movement with the world that transcends our locale and our lifetime. This freedom does not transport us out of our bodies into this other world beyond the pearly gates. Instead it frees us to live fully in this world, in this mortal body we have. This freedom is ours in Christ. It is the result of the power of God, a power greater than the sum of all the powers.

This freedom that is ours in Christ---what do we do with it now? “There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus!” No matter what we’ve done or has been done to us, no matter what we may have previously heard or presently believe, God is not angry with us. He loves us, forgives us,. accepts us as we are, and sets us free to live lives of meaning, purpose, grace, and gratitude.

What is the one regret or misdeed or misfortune that you haven’t been able to release? The one thing that sticks to you and that you wear like a snail does its shell? The one part of your life that forever threatens you with condemnation--- I know you have noticed this trash can right in the middle of our sanctuary. Now I invite you to write down that one thing that has ridden you with guilt and disappointment. Write it down and bring it up to the trash can and throw it in! Say to yourself---“There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.” This is our present-tense reality that is shaped not by guilt but by mercy, not by disappointments but by promise, not by what we’ve done wrong but by what God has done right! (*Time to reflect, write down that one regret that you want to trash forever and put it in the trash can.*)

Now write down on that second piece of paper what you are now free to do since you don’t have the threat of inadequacy and condemnation overshadowing you. What deed might you dare, what challenge will you accept, what act of courage or generosity might you attempt knowing that you are beloved by God and so whether you succeed or fail you have already been pronounced worthy. Now fold that piece of paper and take it with you in the week ahead, a living remembrance of God’s promise not only to be with you but to use you for the sake of the people and world God loves so much.

What will you do with your precious life now that there is no condemnation? What will you do now that you know you are free? What will you do with all the love and grace God can give you? May you be blessed living into this life free of condemnation but filled with potential and promise. Amen and amen.