

Led By The Spirit

Romans 8:14-17

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery
to fall back into fear, but you have received
a spirit of adoption.

When we cry, “Abba! Father!”

it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit
that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs, heirs of God
and joint heirs with Christ
if, in fact, we suffer with him
so that we may also be glorified with him.

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Romans 8:14-17

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I.

Whereas in last week's sermon we "cut right to the chase," in today's sermon I would like to "get down to brass tacks." Specifically, in exploring and trying to understand what, exactly, the Apostle Paul means when he talks about being "led by the Spirit" in today's sermon text from Romans 8. Fortunately or unfortunately, this means getting into a bit of "Systematic Theology," which is a discipline of Christian theology that formulates an orderly, rational, and coherent account of the doctrines of the Christian faith.

Now, if that sounds a little daunting to you, have no fear. Really, what Systematic Theology represents is the landing place at the bottom of the slippery slope of trying to apply reason to a subject that is, essentially, non-rational. While this may be a necessary, and even something of a fun ride, the real value in *taking* the ride is, as always, what we do it with it once our feet hit the ground.

II.

One of the analogies I have found helpful in understanding the role Systematic Theology, is to imagine a line or continuum running from superstition, at one end, to what we might label (for the lack of a better word) enlightenment at the other. Somewhere in the midst of that continuum human reason begins to emerge out of superstition and continues, in some fashion and at whatever pace, until, finally, a "gap" is reached on the other side of which lies, ever increasing degrees of enlightenment.

The challenge is, to close that gap as much as possible so as to make the proverbial "leap of faith" as modest and as achievable as possible. While the unfathomable depth to which one would fall if unsuccessful is always heart-stoppingly the same, covering the distance of a few feet is a very different proposition than having to leap a mile. Simply put, the role of Systematic Theology is to narrow the gap.

III.

For 2000 years, beginning with Paul, the followers of Christ have tried to figure out, using reason as a divinely given gift, just what in heaven's name God is trying to do on this earth, and how? For all of those centuries theologians, not only scholars and so called experts but regular folks just like you and I, have tried to do so *systematically* in a way that makes sense and is cohesive.

Another analogy I find helpful in understanding Systematic Theology is to imagine a house being built using all information we have about God as derived from the Bible; both the New Testament and Hebrew Scriptures. Depending on the builder, the house may resemble a grand palace, a castle-like fortress, or a modest hut. Each chooses what they consider the best place to begin (i.e. their central notion of God) and proceeds to build their theological house. However, at some point prior to completion each discovers they end up being short one piece of wood, stone or adobe.

IV.

All this is to say, we need to moderate our expectations when it comes to understanding God. Though we never truly arrive at the destination, which is a complete understanding of God it is, nonetheless, an essential journey we must always endeavor to make. Which is what we do on Sunday morning, and why we share our lives together as a church, the body of Christ.

Another important thing to remember when it comes to Systematic Theology is that it happens over time and, as such, always happens "on the fly." This includes not only the march of history, but also the progression of the biblical narrative. Last week we celebrated Pentecost, the occasion recounted in scripture when the gift of the Holy Spirit was named and made known to the early church and its succession of believers. Hence, this week, we recognize Trinity Sunday having now been given the third piece of the puzzle in understanding the Godhead as manifested in three distinct, but undifferentiated persons; each with a corresponding role or "office."

V.

Now, if all this makes your head hurt please know you are not alone; my head hurts right along with yours in trying to understand the Christian notion of the Trinity. Which, by the way, is a *human* construct; the word “trinity” is not found in the Bible. Thankfully, though, two millennia of Systematic Theology has done much of the work for us.

Let’s start with the easiest one first, God as Creator. The Westminster Confession of Faith (5:1) states: “God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least.” While we modern humans seem to take our existence somewhat for granted, mistaking scientific discovery for causation, for most of human history folks stood in awe both at the appreciation that the world, and everything in it, exists in the first place; not to mention the stunning beauty and resounding complexity of the earth. All of which we ascribe to God, as our Creator; which is well articulated within Hebrew Scriptures.

VI.

Also within the Hebrew Scriptures the Christian church is introduced to the notion of redemption; one example of which is evidenced in last Sunday’s sermon text from Ezekiel where God proclaims: “*I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.*” The story of the nation of Israel is one which finds repeating cycles that begin with faithfulness followed by disobedience, that results in consequences, which then requires redemption through divine intervention which, then, restores faithfulness.

Such a history serves as a “running start” for our understanding of Christ as Messiah who brings God’s one-time, fix-all redemption born of the cross, not just for the people of Israel and the followers of Christ, but to the entire Creation which, Paul says, has been “groaning together in the pains of childbirth until the present time.” The unique role Jesus Christ occupies, as both fully Divine and fully human, is that of Redeemer; the second part of the Trinity.

VII.

With a basic, but certainly sufficient understanding of God as Creator and Christ as Redeemer, we now arrive at the third aspect of the Trinity, the (Holy) Spirit. Rendered from the Greek word, *paraclete*, the function of the Holy Spirit is that of advocate, counselor, or helper, Systematic Theology understands the role of the Holy Spirit to be that of *Sustainer*. If not already the case, here is where one's temples might start to throb.

Whereas God's role as Creator is hard to miss, and Christ's role as Redeemer had been foretold for centuries and written about extensively throughout the New Testament, the concept and experience of the Holy Spirit finds us in territory which is more uncharted. While the "Spirit" of God is certainly referenced in the Hebrew Scriptures, as in Genesis where the Spirit of God is said to be moving over the face of the deeps, in the Psalms, and a few times by Jesus in the Gospels, the majority of citations specifying the "paraclete" (or Holy Spirit) occur only *after* the story of Pentecost found in the Book of Acts.

VIII.

While the thread of this third person of the Trinity is certainly woven throughout the entire Bible and represents a critical aspect of God, specifics are somewhat hard to come by. More of an issue, is that for the past 2000 years we have had only anecdotal experience limited, primarily, to individuals or small groups of individuals. Further complicating the situation, whereas the concept of God as Creator and Christ as Redeemer are understood as somewhat "fixed," the notion of the Holy Spirit is constantly being experienced and, therefore, reassessed "on the fly" as we move through our lives. In fact, it is this movement through our lives where we expect, and hope, the Holy Spirit not only to meet us, but to lead us.

Consider, if you will, a staircase. If the Trinitarian notions of God as Creator and Christ as Redeemer represent the "step" as the understanding upon which we stand, the riser represents the Holy Spirit which moves us to our next level of understanding. But, only if we are willing to follow where the Spirit will lead us. Which is the hard part, but also the fun part.

IX.

Turning to today's text from Romans, Paul says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." Let us take note of the order which Pauls lays out. Being led by the Spirit is not some kind of reward, fringe benefit, or function of having become a child of God. Instead, Paul seems to suggest we must first come to accept and believe that the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity or Godhead is, in fact, active in the world, and leading it in a certain direction, and we along with it. Seemingly, one becomes a child of God, by virtue of a willingness to allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit. If we think in terms of cause and effect, the "cause" is the Spirit which leads, while the "effect" which results is being (or becoming) a child of God by virtue of being led by the Spirit.

X.

At this point, let me say how appreciative I am of all of you hearing/reading this sermon and abiding me as we have waded through an explanation of Systematic Theology and it's orthodox understanding of the notion of the Trinity. We are almost to the "brass tacks" portion of the sermon; i.e., the "take away." However, before we get there, I think it is helpful to point out the small but important distinction between "following" and "being led."

Here again, an analogy is helpful. Consider the prospect of hiking up a mountain. Rather than seeing us as trying to keep on, or *following* a trail which has been previously established and set before us by the Spirit, being *led* is more like bushwhacking through the wilderness with the Spirit walking right with us to serve as guide, complete with with compass and machete in-hand to blaze the trail. Now, rather than seeing such a trail as going up a mountain, let us consider the trail to be the continuum mentioned at the start of the sermon.

XI.

One of the hardest concepts to grasp within Christian Systematic Theology has to do with the nature of faith. Most folks see it as something we, the believer, has to do, have, or keep. However, the problem with this is that it reduces faith to a "work" rather than properly understanding it as arising from God's gift of grace. Here, then, is where we harvest the fruit of all the hard work we have put in today to understand Systematic Theology.

Whereas the Holy Spirit, as one aspect of God, is certainly able and free to work at any point along the continuum running from superstition at one end to enlightenment at the other, the Holy Spirit is most crucially found within the gap which requires the so-called “leap of faith.” We are not able to make the leap because we must muster a sufficient amount of faith to cover the gap. Instead, the Holy Spirit (that is God) *provides* us with the necessary faith, as a gift, which enables us to make the leap, cover the ground, and reach the other side which, on our own, we wouldn’t be able to do. This is the good news.

XII.

The bad news, is that this is not a one time leap, but one we must make over and over again throughout the course of our lives. While the first step, or leap, is always a doozy, once we’ve made it across to the other side, even once, future attempts become, while not necessarily easier, a much more comfortable prospect knowing that the leap is, in fact, possible and in having begun to trust the process of going where the Holy Spirit will take us. The more we are able to do it, the more practiced we become at allowing ourselves to be led by the Spirit; thereby *becoming* the Children of God, and living our lives as God intended and as we have been created to be.

XIII.

So we arrive at the aforementioned “brass tacks” of today’s sermon, and there are two. First, is that place on the far side of the gap, across from the jump-off point to which we have been brought by our reason and the resulting Systematic Theology. Though I have used the word “enlightenment” to describe it, equally applicable are the words peace, assurance, and belonging. Less a place and more a feeling or understanding, having made the leap of faith we experience a “rightness” about living our lives in sync with, or in obedience to God.

While we might not always necessarily like or enjoy that place to which the Holy Spirit has led us, we know it is where we *should* be, and where God *intends* us to be; which is something to be celebrated and savored. Unfortunately, it is often the case that we do not linger there for very long, as life keeps coming at us and soon we find ourselves right back at the the jump-off spot. However, that good and pleasant sensation of living in right relationship with God abides with us; girding and preparing us to leap once more.

XIV.

Which brings us to the second and final brass tack. The life of faith is not an abstraction, or an idea stored away on the top shelf of our inner closet. The life of faith is that process of being led by the Holy Spirit to make whatever leap needs to be made next, and then actually making such a leap. While we might think such a process necessarily includes those *big* life decisions, the greater truth is the better we become at being led by the Holy Spirit, the more we discover that we *are* being led by that same spirit in all the *little* decisions of life. Which, to me, is where the real fun comes in.

While we may find little comfort in the notion of being predestined to follow some set course through life, we can be both encouraged and excited by the opportunity to embark on the daily adventure to determine where the Holy Spirit would lead us to leap next. Though this will require no small amount of work, it is a joyful labor which will always bear much fruit; though we might not immediately recognize it as such right away.

XV.

Finally, I would like to end today by pulling back the curtain a bit and sharing with you my realization that the past 25 years here at this church have been, for me, both a challenge and a joy in discovering how to allow our congregation to be “led by the spirit.” I confess, if ever there was some kind of “grand plan” banging around in my head, I have long-since been disabused of such a notion. In its place is the discovery that all we need do is endeavor to love and honor God, love and honor each other (friends and strangers alike) and open our hearts, minds and bodies to where the Holy Spirit, as one member of the Trinity, would lead us. Which is simple, though not easy; but always a whole lot of fun. Amen.