

8C 2022

Ideas are not like geography.

As strange as it might be to be told, “You can’t get there from here,” that is the literal truth when we are talking about theology.

Where we end up depends in large part on where we start.

Today’s readings make clear three important starting points that many Christians get wrong.

As a result, they end up going far afield of the way of love taught by Christ.

These three points concern freedom, the body, and individualism.

First, we read Paul’s impassioned plea that we embrace our freedom as God’s creatures.

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

A primary reason that people start at the wrong place is that they stop reading at the wrong place, somewhere before the context is clear.

They imagine that “stand firm” means dominating a situation, doing whatever is necessary to control others.

They think, moreover, that freedom means getting whatever they want, always having their way, so we stand firm to get what we want.

If we continue reading, however, Paul says, “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Freedom, in other words, is not about getting our way or controlling the situation, but is the exact opposite.

It is about letting go of the need for control and working together with others to lift one another up.

Otherwise, we are slaves to our own need for control.

People dedicate their entire lives, for example, to controlling how others see them.

They are slaves to appearance.

Others dedicate their lives to escaping awareness of their own emotional states.

They are slaves to their emotions.

Still others spend all their time attempting to fulfill their every desire, blind to the needs of others around them.

They are slaves to their desires.

Christ, on the other hand, frees us from this slavery so that we can be a part of a community.

Christianity always leads back to the cross, not to domination and control.

We find freedom in letting go, in humbly accepting our own and others imperfections, in acknowledging the reality of the world and working to build a community in which people trust one another and build one another up.

Christ loved his own in the world and loved them to the end.

He never tried to control them, to force his ideas on them, neither by fear, nor by shame, nor by violence.

Second, Paul tells the Galatians (and, by extension, all of us) to avoid *the flesh*.

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh.”

Paul opposes flesh and Spirit and says that the flesh will prevent us from achieving what we want.

That is, it prevents us from accomplishing our shared goal as creatures of God—peace, harmony, integrity, truth, and love.

When we are able to follow the Spirit, as Paul explains, we do not need the law to lead us because what we should do will be obvious.

The law is a guide for those who have no empathy, whose hearts do not allow them to hear the silent voice of the Spirit.

For them, following rules is the best they can achieve.

Many stop reading at Paul’s opposition of flesh and the Spirit and assume that flesh refers to corporal sins, especially sexual sins.

This fits in well with the need to control others because the sexual dimension of our being reaches deep within.

If one can shame people about their sexual desires, which in my advanced years seem to be about as varied as the number of people on the planet, then one can establish profound control indeed.

You create people who are so busy looking over their shoulders that they do not have time to be creative.

Once again, however, if one *continues* reading, one finds that Paul's "sins of the flesh" are not corporal sins, but include "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions" and other things that have nothing to do with the body *per se*.

In fact, if we look closely at the whole list, we realize that when Paul says "flesh," he means something close to what post-Freudian society would call *ego*.

Though we cannot exist without an ego, if we allow ourselves to be controlled by it, it causes us to want to impose our views on others, to have our way at every turn, in short, to quarrel and dissent just as Paul describes rather than seeking ways of mutual benefit.

Christianity is not about hatred of the body or of its various functions.

Our bodies were purposefully created by God.

On the contrary, Christian theology is about embodiment, about incarnation.

As my Franciscan friend quipped, we have a whole feast named after it.

The Feast of the Incarnation is also known as Christmas.

There is nothing shameful about our bodies or their functions, sexual or otherwise.

It is what we sometimes do to obtain sex that is problematic—lying, betraying,
manipulating.

Those things are always unacceptable, but there is nothing wrong with bodies *per se*.

In fact, Christianity is about people working together, rubbing elbows, face to face, in
community with others to build one another up.

Christianity is not a thought experiment.

Though remote prayer is fine as a supplement, we are not living out Christian values if
we are not meeting in the body and building up community together.

We come to church to worship together, and worship is a joint effort.

If, when you come to St. James, you feel as though you are sitting and watching a show
up front, then we are doing it wrong.

It should feel like a mutual and joyous sharing of our hearts before God, each one of us
with our own part to play.

Sadly, narcissism and its enablers are one the rise.

Appreciation for community is being lost as people sit behind computers where they carefully craft images of their lives for FaceBook, Instagram, or TikTok and seek approval from others.

This is not real.

Real is listening, really listening, while someone shares a joy or a burden and then giving him a hug.

Real is disagreeing and, through careful listening, understanding one another better through that disagreement.

Real is sitting down and having a meal with someone.

As I sat in my office writing this homily, Sheila, our treasurer, was in her office preparing for the vestry meeting; Chris was in the Comfort Room next door sitting at the table provided by Jan and researching an article for the newsletter; David was in his office being the rock of stability and productivity that he is, and I had just met with our quirky and delightful wardens in preparation for the vestry meeting after they had just met with one of our wonderful parishioners who was helping them with a project.

People were using their unique gifts all around to sustain a place for us all where the body of Christ could thrive.

It was joyful and alive, free and open to the guidance of the Spirit.

Christian freedom is not well-defended selfishness; it is not control of others through hatred of the body and its pleasures.

It is the freedom to be fully embodied beings in supportive community with others.

We do not despise the body or its various functions, nor do we police them.

In fact, we celebrate all that God has made.

We do not seek to put on the full armor of God in the sense of literally defending ourselves against others.

Full armor of God is a metaphor for wholly turning ourselves over to the guidance of God rather than seeking to maintain our own defenses against all others.

Jesus spread the gospel not through literal or spiritual violence, but through empathy and humility to any who would listen.

Those who would not, he simply passed by as we saw in the gospel today when the sons of Zebedee wanted to rain fire upon them and Christ said no.

They could simply move on to the next village.

God invites us, our total mind/body/spirit, into relationship with one another and with God as members of the incarnate body of Christ, the one through whom and out of whom we were all made.

I hope that, at St. James, you can feel how freeing it is to know that you are, in your entirety, in the unity of your whole mind, body, and spirit, welcomed and appreciated.