

11A 2023

Last week, we talked about Paul's distinction between the flesh and the Spirit.

His use of the word "flesh" has been misused to justify hating the body and anything associated with it, but our bodies are the glorious creations of the Father of light, so I wanted to make it clear that reading contemporary understandings of a word like "flesh" back into another language in the past is misleading, at best.

This is what makes translation so challenging.

I said that, for Paul, what we translate as flesh is that aspect of us that is more individualistic, more ego driven, and that the Spirit is that aspect in which we all participate because we are all made out of and are connected with God, and through God, with each other.

We talked about the importance of *freeing* ourselves, but did not touch deeply on the *meaning* of freedom because that would have made the homily thirty minutes long, and I know you like them to be closer to twenty-eight.

The readings this week give me an opportunity to discuss more fully the Christian understanding of "freedom," which is also often misunderstood and misused.

This misunderstanding flows, however, not from the difficulty of translation, but from our life experience.

When we are working for our individual survival, which we must do at times, we think mostly about ourselves, our own needs, but we then forget about our mutual dependence, the connected aspect of ourselves.

At these moments, freedom feels like it means doing whatever we want.

We think it means fulfilling all our survival needs, but we forget our need for *meaning*.

The reality is that there is more to life than mere survival, so when we pursue only the goal of self-fulfillment, a part of us, a very significant part of us that is connected to others and to God, is starved.

It is like one finger turning to the other and saying, “I don’t depend on you. I’m going my own way.”

We sometimes respond to the resultant spiritual malnutrition simply by pursuing the same plan with even more gusto.

If a hundred-foot yacht is not enough, then maybe a two-hundred-foot yacht will do the trick.

There was that video that circulated some years ago of a preacher telling his large congregation that his current jet was too small to allow him to evangelize the world.

They needed to buy him a bigger jet.

Anyway, when we think only of what contributes to survival—food, shelter, money, and even power—we fail to realize what is lacking—meaning.

Meaning is achieved when we feel *a part of*.

We say something is meaningless when it stands alone.

It is the same with words.

The words “brillig” and “slithy” have no definition, no relationship to other words.

They stand alone, so we call them nonsense words.

Similarly, when *we* have no relationship to anything else, we feel empty, meaningless,
yet try to fill ourselves with things that cannot give meaning.

Jung wrote that “The least of things with a meaning is worth more in life than the
greatest of things without it.”¹

What makes life feel meaningful and fulfilling is being a valued part of a community,
working together with others, and giving of ourselves.

Paul tries to explain this to the Romans by saying that we are, in fact, *enslaved* when we
ignore the Spirit, like someone trying to fill a sieve with water.

We often end up trying to create meaning through comparison, through a negative
relationship to others.

“Well, at least *my* sieve is better than that guy’s. It’s bigger and gold plated.”

1 Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, (1933), p. 67.

We try ever harder to find fulfillment by gaining things that are only good for surviving, but lack the thing required for thriving.

I had a wonderful advisor at UCLA, which prides itself on being a research institution. She was working hard to compete, to climb the academic ladder, but spoke somewhat wistfully of a colleague who had taken a job at a teaching institution.

This colleague had time for gardening; she enjoyed her students.

Competition does not slake our thirst.

Someone described hell as where people cannot eat because their elbows do not bend.

When asked what heaven was like, he said that it was the same, but they feed each other.

Comparative, negative meaning can become extreme.

Becoming a member of a hate organization or of a gang, for example, might give us a shallow sense of meaning, of belonging to something outside ourselves, but it does not connect us with the *whole*, with the Spirit that underlies all of existence, and we feel it.

Anything that sets us against others isolates and is not worthy of the teaching of Christ.

When we prevent people from being a part of the whole, as I said last week, we sin.

People even misuse religion to divide rather than to unite, which is how we recognize their hypocrisy.

They will say they know the truth and are in a battle against evil,
but we are not the one's who conquer evil, even the evil within ourselves.

Christian triumph is not one of conquering, but about submission, about, humility, about
honesty.

We expose the potential for evil within us to our own awareness, and it shrinks as we
allow God to guide us.

As for those who misuse religion, Christ already warned us: "Not everyone who says to
me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the
will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did
we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many
mighty works in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go
away from me, you who behave lawlessly.'"

Lawlessly means, of course, behaving in ways not attune to the needs of the whole.

This is why Christ said "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come [to us all], but woe
to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were
hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause
one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard!"

When people were trying to prevent children from approaching Jesus, he said, "Let the
children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the
kingdom of heaven belongs."

People interpret this as meaning that the kingdom belongs to those who are sinless and innocent, but apparently those people have not met any children.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to all who are sincerely interested.

Being a part is the point.

In being a part of the community of the Spirit, we gain our freedom from meaninglessness, from endlessly trying to fill our sieves.

We no longer must chase escapes or power because we are comfortable being how God made us.

We know that we are all wonderfully made and are free to contribute out of our particular gifts.

We recognize, of course, that many people are lost.

They mistake surviving for thriving.

We pray for them and for us that we may all understand what it is that makes life meaningful.

Paul reassures the Romans, “you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.”

We are a part of God.

We do not fight God’s battles.

God is quite capable.

We build relationships, we serve, we invite people in to accept their God-created place
among us.

This is how we find meaning.

This is how we find freedom.

This is how we thrive rather than merely survive.