

Lent 5 – March 26, 2023

Text: Romans 8:1-10

Theme: "Spirit Walking in a Flesh-Walker World"

Sadly, the church has sometimes been known as a place for condemnation. Talk to most anybody but especially people who no longer attend any church and we can hear stories of guilt, shame and condemnation. I have heard the stories of being yelled at and humiliated as children – the stories of being shamed because of your clothes or your family or your poor choices.

When I lived in Alabama, I came to know many very well churched people. One such person was speaking of someone who had been a crass unbeliever his whole life. However, as he neared death, he began to speak to a pastor and eventually came to openly confess Christ just hours before his death. The person speaking told me, "I would hate to meet my maker with so little preparation." What? What happened to rejoicing in heaven that someone had been saved?

When I was at another congregation, I worked very hard to make a couple who led an alternate life-style feel welcome to worship with us. I explained to them that while we would never condone their lifestyle choice, we would never exclude anyone for any particular sin. They began attending very tentatively – fearing that they might be condemned, but eventually, they began to attend frequently and even began attending Bible study. Sadly, when I left, they were told that they made Christian people feel uncomfortable and should not come to that church until they corrected

their lifestyle. What happened to “The first shall be last and the last shall be first?” Which sinners are we going to exclude next week? I just want to know the schedule so that I know when I should stop coming to church.

Cranky people who want to complain about children making noise in worship learn quickly not to complain to me because I will tell them that a quiet church is a dying church and after the pandemic when so few children were in worship, I hate the sound of a quiet church even more. I love hearing children make noise in worship, but I know one young mother who simply quit going to her church because someone told her that her baby was disturbing their worship.

And our youth might have already figured out that both God and I love them however they come to Church and that we could not care less what kind of clothes they have on or how they wear their hair or what jewelry or art they have on their bodies. God and I are both just thrilled to death that they have come here to bring him thanks and praise. But in my travels to many congregations, I have run into teenagers who quit coming to church because the adults there gave them no approval, no acceptance and in fact made them feel like they were not part of the family because of their age or clothing or body art.

All the people of whom I just spoke were condemned in a place where we are supposed to be loved and accepted by everyone no matter what stupidities we commit. That is what Paul tells us when he says:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."

Paul goes on to describe how this life with no condemnation might look. He says:

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Did you get that? Paul says that because Jesus kept the Law perfectly for us, we are no longer flesh-walkers but Spirit-walkers. A "flesh-walker" is someone who has confidence in the ways of the world. He is "rule minded" and believes that the best thing to do in life is to get to the place where you make the rules or at least enforce the rules, and can condemn anyone who fails to live up to them. His life has a great deal to do with things like money, power, and prestige. The point is that a flesh-walker uses his position to manipulate the rules to get what he thinks he needs.

Now the flesh-walker might look really holy and pious – in fact it is the flesh walkers that keep churches doing things the same way all the time because God forbid that we should ever change anything! A flesh-walker

thinks we were created to keep the law. That's why the Pharisees got so mad at Jesus when he healed on the Sabbath.

Spirit-walkers place all their confidence in God. A Spirit-walker believes that God loves and accepts every one of us just the way we are right now. That does not mean that God loves our sin. He does not love our sin. He hates our sin but as long as we are covered in the robes of Christ, He does not see our sin. So, a Spirit-walker knows that life is not about keeping rules, but about receiving the gifts. Life in the Church is about discovering that God is a bottomless well of gifts, and those gifts slowly change us into more and more Godly people.

Yesterday was the Feast of the Annunciation of Our Lord. That is the day that the angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary and told her that she was pregnant with Jesus. This day is celebrated throughout Christendom as a day to rejoice. Even though we are headed down the long, dark path of Lent that will end on Good Friday at the crucifixion of our Lord, we rejoice at Gabriel's announcement that Jesus would be the Savior of the world, and so He is. He is the one who gives us the power to be spirit-walkers in a flesh-walker world. Think of Mary. How much faith did it take for her to believe the angel? How much faith did it take for her to watch her son grow up and become the target for the religious leaders? How much faith did it take for her to stand by as her son was crucified? Mary shows us the power of the faith God gives us, the faith that makes us into spirit-walkers.

The flesh-walker in us falls into defining success in terms of what we get in this world. When we are being flesh-walkers we are concerned about being always right, and we want to argue every point and win every challenge because that is how flesh-walkers define success. When you win, you succeed. When you have power and control, you succeed.

The spirit-walker in us, that was created at our baptism and grows when fed the Word of God and the body and blood of Christ, will remind us that success is found not in winning, but in serving. Once, on a servant event, four youth and I moved a new refrigerator into the kitchen of a woman who had not a refrigerator in years. She literally danced around the yard with tears running down her face and shouting "Thank-you Jesus, thank-you Jesus, thank-you Jesus." We felt like the kings of the world.

The flesh-walker in us always puts ourselves first, always worries about what people will think of us, always worries that our slice of the pie might be smaller than someone else's slice, always worries that someone might take advantage of us.

The Spirit-walker puts others first. The priority is helping, loving and lifting up other people and knowing that God takes care of us. We don't have to worry about ourselves. If God cares about the lilies of the field, if not one little bird falls to the ground without him knowing, imagine how much he loves and cares for us. So, Spirit-walkers have the freedom to focus on others.

Jesus took his disciples aside and reminded them that the greatest in his kingdom is the one who serves the most not the one who has the most power and control. Paul reminds us as he reminds the Christians in Rome that flesh-walking, though our natural way, is now foreign to us. We have been washed in the waters of Baptism and fed with the body and blood of Christ so now there is no condemnation; no condemnation for us and no condemnation for others. We are not the sin police looking for and pointing out all of a person's faults and failures but rather, we are the Grace patrol, rejoicing in God's gifts to all humanity and leading everyone to those gifts, loving people as they are and lifting people up above the surly bonds of earth to help them touch the face of God.