

“Self or Christ?”
Psalm 65:2-13; Romans 7:25b-8:11
1st Presbyterian Church, Marshfield, WI
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Romans 7 and 8 are essentially two sides of the same coin. Romans 7 is about the person who wants to run his or her own life—like most of us do a lot of the time. Romans 8 is about the person who lets God run his or her life—like most of want to have happen and at which we get better day by day. Romans 7 tells us about Paul’s internal struggle to live as he wants with God’s guidance, and how he constantly fails when he is on his own. Romans 8 tells us what a Spirit empowered life can look like, if we stand in a relationship to Jesus Christ.

A life lived for ourselves is a life pulled every which way by sin. Even on those occasions when we want to do what God asks of us, if we are on our own, we simply do not have the power to live the laws God gives us for our own safety. We along with Paul, always end up doing what we don’t want to do. Sin is always at the door and trips us up. It is embedded within us. It fouls up our very nature, no matter how hard we try to overcome it. At the end, Paul’s cry is “I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?” The answer he says is that “Jesus Christ can and does.” He goes on in Chapter 8 to tell us what Christ has done for us as we live out our lives in relationship to him.

Remember what we learned in the Discovery Moment. Recall that I told the children that it was Jesus’ coat that I had put on Allyssa. Remember that Allyssa admitted that she made mistakes in her life and had not always done the right things. She said that if God looked at her, he would see a broken and imperfect young lady, just as if he looked at us, he would see broken and messed up human beings. How can people like us stand before God with any hope of acceptance? That is where the coat comes in, because it is not just any coat, it is Jesus’ coat of righteousness. When we stand with him in a relationship of faith, he puts **his** righteousness upon us. So, God sees us as perfect, because we wear Jesus’ coat of righteousness.

But are we, therefore, perfect in ourselves? Not by a long shot, because we may appear righteous on the outside, but under the coat we still have our old nature. As Luther said, “We are simultaneously righteous and sinful.” But Christ is not about to leave it there. His suffering and death were not for naught. He wants the entire mess cleaned up, and so he sends the Holy Spirit to work on cleansing our inward being over time. That isn’t instantaneous, because you and I all know that despite our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we still struggle. So, when God looks at us, because of Christ’s coat, we appear righteous to him, but when we look at ourselves, we still see war going on in us. But the more we learn to walk with Christ, the less that struggle will be over time. We will learn to live in the arms of God the Holy Spirit, who draws us into the circle of love of God the Father and God the Son. We learn that we are not alone, and that leads us into a life like Christ’s, a life lived for others, as our missionaries to Tennessee are about to do. A life for others, puts us in harmony with Christ and the Spirit, for you cannot live for self, if the Holy Spirit is working in you.

Let's look at Jesus' way of life to which the Spirit leads us. Probably the word that best describes it is "inclusive." Jesus never turned anyone away that was honestly seeking for a deeper more meaningful life. This is the message that those of you headed out on a mission on behalf of the Lord Jesus need to internalize.

Take for example Jesus' inclusion of women in his entourage. In Jesus' day, women really had to reach up to touch bottom. They had absolutely no standing in society. They couldn't testify in court, because everyone knew they were liars. They were not permitted to learn Torah. Think of Eli's reaction when Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was praying at the Tabernacle. He saw her lips moving, and rather than believe she was praying, he assumed she was drunk. Jesus includes among his close associates Mary Magdalene whom he had cured of demonic possession. He includes Martha and Mary, and actually applauds Mary's desire to learn. All of this absolutely flew in the face of the standards of the time, but Jesus didn't care. God loves all people.

Then, of course, there was the Samaritan woman at the well. She had three strikes against her. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews, because they were only partially "Jewish." They were imports from other nations which had been conquered by Israel's enemies, and now they were living in the land and ostensibly worshipping the God of Israel, but doing it badly and not in the right place, from a Jewish point of view. **Strike one!**

The **second strike** was that this Samaritan was a Women!!! She didn't amount to a hill of beans. And beyond that, she seems to have had less than pristine morals having had five husbands, and the man she was currently living with was not her husband. Thus, **strike three.** Jesus' disciples were stunned when they found him talking to her, but had enough sense to keep their mouths shut. They were beginning to realize that Jesus marched to a different drummer than any person they had ever met.

Jesus met people right where they were. There were no demands that they change before he would have anything to do with them. He simply loved them. Conventional morality was of no interest to him, if it didn't include the hand of love extended to every person, no matter their station in life.

Similarly, he included all men, especially those on the fringes of society—such as tax collectors. Why were they such outcastes? Because they worked for the enemy, the Romans. It would be comparable to having this country occupied by the Russians or the Chinese and being forced to pay taxes to them, with your next-door neighbor being the one collecting the tax. They were collaborators! But Jesus sat down regularly with them at meals, along with all sorts of other misfits from the fringes. The religious leaders simply threw a fit, because he didn't fit any of their pigeon holes, but Jesus seems not to have cared at all about their opinions.

And speaking of enemies, they were not beyond his reach and love. Do you remember the Roman Centurion's servant who was ill? This Roman, an occupying soldier, came to Jesus in anguish over this seriously ill man who served him. Jesus would have been well within his rights

to have turned the man away, because he was an oppressor of the Jewish people. The thought, however, never seemed to cross Jesus' mind. He started to go with this foreigner, only to be told by the Roman Centurion that he had sufficient faith in Jesus, so that all Jesus had to do was to say the word, and the servant would be healed. And thus, it was so. What Faith! What Compassion!

Lepers were even lower on the totem pole than were women. People were terribly afraid of getting the disease. Any kind of skin disease seems to have fallen into the category of leprosy. People shunned them on every street and at every corner. They had to constantly proclaim they were unclean, could touch no one, and were driven away with stones. They survived by the support of relatives or friends, if they were lucky, who would bring out food and set it at a distance from them. No one would have dreamed of touching them. Jesus had no such hangups. He would embrace them, lay his hands on them, cleanse them, and send them off to the priests to verify their healing.

One of the greatest Christians in history began his ministry in that manner. He is known today as St. Francis of Assisi. His call really came as he had compassion on a leper, only to realize that it was Jesus calling him out of himself. Remember that when you have compassion on another human being, that person represents Jesus to you.

This is the style of life to which Jesus calls us through the Holy Spirit. He doesn't ask us to pick and choose whom we will serve. He just meets us in the form of elderly ladies, sick children, neighbors with cancer, church members suffering from dementia, children who have divorced, the poor on skid row, the wealthy widow who has just lost her husband, children who do not have enough to eat in the schools, and migrants simply looking for a home where they can settle down and work productively. He is present in every one of these people, and the measure of our love for him is the measure of our willingness to help each of these.

Paul tells us that since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ there is a new power working in the world today. It is the power of God working, as the Holy Spirit changes our attitudes and feelings toward others. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the heart and love of Christ as we begin to walk with our Lord and Savior who is cleaning up our acts and gives us new values—the values of the crucified and Risen Christ.

Hence, wearing Jesus' coat is not a free pass. It doesn't let us sit and glory in our status or standing with Jesus. It demands that we become like Jesus himself in our behaviors and attitudes. The only way for that to happen is for members of the Church to be bound in a living relationship with Jesus Christ. From his life flows our lives. From his attitudes spring our attitudes. From his service springs our service. This is precisely what

Emma,
Mackenzie,
Carly,
Addison, and Carmen

are going to discover as they go to Nashville to be of service to other people. This trip may be one of the hardest things you have ever done, especially as you mix with the poor and homeless, and see their struggles and suffering.

But it will be the most rewarding thing you have done to this point in your lives, for you will see gratitude in the faces of those to whom you reach out in love. Your hands will be Christ's hands. Your arms will be the arms of Jesus. Your words of comfort and hope will be the words of Christ to them. Your sorrow for their struggles will be Jesus' sorrow, too, because you will be looking on the people with the eyes of Jesus. If you let the Holy Spirit guide you, you will find yourself where Jesus would be. This will not be an intellectual experience. It will not be a mere head knowledge of faith. It will be a life changing challenge to you to continue on the road you have begun with Jesus for the rest of your lives.

Those of us who stay behind will be supporting you with our prayers. When you return home, we will look forward to participating in your experience as you share the miracles that you will see in the coming week. You will return stronger, more committed Christians, because you have let Jesus and Holy Spirit into your lives. Hopefully, you will never again be satisfied with the pablum of "sit and glow" Christianity. You will have learned that real Christians get their hands dirty and their emotions moved as they serve as Jesus served while on earth, and as he now serves a universe wide community of active, practical followers who bear his name.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.