

PENTECOST IV

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. Romans 8:3

A untold amount of suffering has resulted from this passage in Romans, and from so much else in Paul's letters. His utter condemnation of the sins of the flesh, his denunciation of so many forms of human behavior and activity, his free use of secular codes of conduct and laws from his time, codes that dictate the oppression of women, laws that countenance slavery—who can estimate what damage such passages have caused? Who can know how many millions these pronouncements have driven from the Church and from Christianity altogether? And worse, who can fathom the self-hatred and self-condemnation that Paul's denunciations have caused or intensified?

But troublesome and harmful as some of Paul's statements may seem, we cannot and must not discount or dismiss him. For one thing, he has a great deal of value to offer, both about the challenges and joys of living in community, and about the nature of Christ and the grace of God. For another, deciding to throw out parts of the canon is dangerous. The Bible is the story of our salvation history, and we need to wrestle with it faithfully and wholly. If we begin to discard what we don't like, others may well do the same. What if someone decided to throw out *Love your neighbor as yourself*? We may say to ourselves that we know plenty of "Christians" who behave as if they've thrown out that commandment. But we have the Bible to remind us, and them, that Jesus said that, and put it second only to the love of God. So, we keep the Bible, and deal with it!

And yet another truth to remember about Paul's writing, and much else in Scripture as well, is that the Church's use and abuse of Scripture over the millennia has caused far more trouble than anything the writers and compilers would even have imagined or wanted. The overall theme of Scripture, the story of God's activity in the world, is a story of salvation, grace and love. Damnation does not have the last word. Banishment does not have the last word. Death does not have the last word.

The principle reasons for the misuse of Scripture are two, I believe. One is innocent enough; for most of our Christian history scholars did not have the tools, and for centuries did not have the permission, to examine the language of Scripture critically and contextually. Translations were imperfect, and the culture of the biblical eras was not well understood. That the Word of God was not written by God but by fallible human beings, beings who were bound by the culture and knowledge of their time: these are realities that have only penetrated our understanding, really, in the last century or so.

To take one salient example, which I know some of you have heard from me before: the Greek word (and I don't know what it is) that has been translated for centuries as homosexual, is really of very ambiguous meaning. A scholar of New Testament Greek told me that years ago. "For all we know," he said, "it could mean couch potato!" So. Need I say more?

I promised last week that I'd say more about flesh, and what Paul means by flesh. A contemporary Franciscan theologian, Richard Rohr, has suggested that we should in fact translate Paul's *flesh* as *ego-centeredness*. Think about that for a minute. In fact, when you go home, think about it a

lot. Flesh not as skin and bone and orifices and sex organs, but flesh as ego, as self-centeredness.

Later, in the letter to the Galatians, Paul enumerates the sins of the flesh:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the realm of God.

Now I grant you that some of this list involves the body. But Paul does not condemn sexual activity per se; he qualifies everything. Sex that is immoral, impure or debauched is not okay. Nor are drunkenness or orgies. Who among us would not agree with that argument. The body is not bad, flesh is not evil, not even sex is wrong. It's the morality, or lack of, with which sexual activity is undertaken that is at issue, and that determines our participation in the realm of God.

So what if we think of flesh as meaning ego-centeredness? The ego, as Rohr means it and I'm using it, is the drive for power and self promotion. That concept works, I think for this entire list. Sexual activity meant only as self-serving, that is unfaithful, domineering, unmindful and disrespectful of others,— selfish sex is wrong. And the other items on Paul's list have nothing to do with how we think of flesh and everything to do with ego, with the hunger and drive for power , control, and self aggrandizement: *idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy.*

These sins have nothing to do with “the flesh” as we mean it today, and everything to do with the ego. They are all about soul-sickness: selfishness, divisiveness, aggressiveness—they are all about turning away from love and peace, turning away from God.

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame, Shakespeare called it. He was talking about lust, and I have no doubt he meant sexual lust, “fleshly lust.” But all of these sins listed by Paul have to do with lust: lust for self-importance, for other people’s stuff (envy), lust for power.

If we accept this contemporary understanding of what Paul probably meant by flesh, that is, all in us that is consumed with self rather than with other, with God, we can free ourselves from the burden of believing that our sex lives and love of good food and drink are judged and condemned out of hand.

We are freed from those old misunderstandings, that old abuse. However, we are faced, I think, with even greater challenges. Ridding ourselves of ego, of our craving for importance, for affirmation, for power of one kind or another—eliminating all those selfish drives and desires seems daunting, seems, in fact impossible.

It’s certainly not a short-term project. Purifying our souls is a lifetime process, and one never to be completed in our lives here on earth. And certainly impossible through our efforts alone. But as Jesus promises us. *with God, all things are possible. Alleluia! Amen*