

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Before Don and I moved to Westminster, we had a cleaning business. During the days we cleaned homes and a church, and in the evenings we cleaned office buildings. We were scheduled by most homeowners to come every other week, but we did the businesses we every week.

One of the homes that we cleaned required some special attention every time we went. The woman of the house gave us instructions for how she wanted things done. Every week we were supposed to move all of the furniture and wash down all of the woodwork in the house, and, of course, vacuum under all of the furniture. We were instructed to wash off all of the wooden knick-knacks, and there were a lot of them. We were told to open the windows and wash the sill between the glass and the screen as well as the windowsill inside the house.

We were also instructed to use furniture polish every time we cleaned. The furniture was so slick that the smallest breeze would move knick-knacks and other things placed on the furniture. We had to take our shoes off and work in our stocking feet. This house was spotless every time we went to clean, because during the in-between weeks when we did not clean, she cleaned. If we saw her before it was our day to clean her house, she would warn us that her house was filthy.

Let me tell you—if she thought her house was filthy, I would hate to think what she thought of our house. She was obsessed with having a clean house! The house was a rancher with a finished basement. We did not need to clean the bathroom; but still it took as long to clean that house as it did to clean houses twice its size. If it weren't for the fact that the family were friends who attended our home church, I would have been willing to give up that job. Her obsession with having a perfectly clean house had to be a burden on her, her husband, their three children, and the people they invited into their home. I wondered how visitors could relax in that house, especially if they had children.

She was one of the first people I thought of when I read today's scripture in Romans. The word "obsessed" caught my attention. To obsess about something is to preoccupy persistently or abnormally about something. People obsess over all kinds of things today. I know people who will not eat M&Ms or Skittles without sorting them by color first. There are others who cannot eat their food if different foods are touching one another. Obsessions of this nature likely do not hinder one's way of life, but other kinds of obsessions almost paralyze people from living a full life.

Don's mother, for example, was obsessed with the fear of falling. She was so scared that she did not exercise the two brand new knees that she had, which made her knees stiff and sore and her muscles weak. It had gotten so bad that she did very little other than watch television and sleep. She rarely went out of the house. Her obsession with the fear of falling controlled her life.

Paul wrote that we can be free from the dark clouds of sin and death that hang over us, the things that we obsess over that keep us from being all God created us to be and from doing all God calls us to do. What do we obsess over? What are those things that keep us from diving in whole heartedly to the freedom that God can provide? Is it fear, pain, physical and emotional pain, broken relationships, peer pressure, money, prestige? What holds you back?

The people Paul wrote to were obsessed with the law which the church leaders said would please God. The people worked hard to follow it, but it was nearly impossible to follow with perfection, leaving them feeling like failures. Paul told them that with the arrival of Jesus

and all that he did for them, they could stop obsessing over the law. The problem of being imperfect humans was solved. He wrote, "The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death."

Paul sort of reprimanded the people telling them that their obsession with the law led to dependence on themselves to do the right thing to please God. He said relying on anything other than the Spirit was just a dead end. They held themselves captive in spiritual prison cells of restlessness, dissatisfaction and failure. Their focus on self has influenced how they felt about others because they expected everyone to live by their lifestyle model. The people failed to see how the law, incredibly detailed and impossible to follow to the letter, tore them down instead of building them up. The law served only to expose and accentuate sin. Jesus came to do the exact opposite. The law was powerless to make the people right before God. God's grace and mercy made them one with God.

We struggle with the same kind of tension in our own lives. We may not struggle with laws, although some people cross that line; but many of us do struggle with the standards we put on ourselves. We either make up our own ways of measuring whether we are successful in our endeavors; or we use scripture to measure our worth and the value of others in God's sight, making scripture into nothing more than a rule book. We try to succeed on our own. That's the problem—trying to live a Godly life on our own. We cannot do it.

In many other translations of the Bible, the word self is translated as flesh. The word flesh in these verses comes from the Greek word "sarks." It is not the same word used for the physical body. That word is "soma."

Commentary writer, Walter Taylor wrote, "For Paul the body is neither good nor bad in and of itself. The issue is how the body is used. When the body is used as God intended, the body is good. But when the body is used inappropriately and opposed to God's intention, it is for Paul a sinful body. Paul's shorthand expression for a body that is misused is the term flesh. And so to live inappropriately is called living according to the flesh, which in Greek is "kata sarka."

Therefore, living according to the flesh, even though we may be trying to do all the right stuff, separates us from God. It means that we try to make it on our own, relying on the things that are of this physical world, like the things we can see, hear and feel. Living according to the flesh means trusting the standards of this world rather than God; and that only leads to death, in this lifetime.

But Paul tells us that we have another choice. We can choose to live according to the Spirit. William Barclay wrote this explanation for the use of the word Spirit in this text.

"Spirit in this single chapter occurs no fewer than twenty times. This word has a very definite Old Testament background. In Hebrew it is ruach, and it has two basic thoughts, (a) It is not only the word for Spirit; it is also the word for wind. It has always had the idea of power about it—power as of a mighty rushing wind. (b) In the Old Testament, it always has the idea of something that is more than human. Spirit, to Paul, represented a power which was divine."

So, Spirit here is not the human spirit. Instead, it is the surging power of the Spirit of God. Baptism in the Church of the Brethren is a public act or statement symbolizing the washing away of the old self. The baptism ends with the laying on of hands and prayer for the blessing of the Holy Spirit to be upon the person who was baptized. At baptism we choose to no longer be obsessed with ourselves and the Holy Spirit moves in our lives.

We make the decision, whether we will be obsessed with ourselves or whether we will focus our attention on the Spirit and allow the Spirit to build us up? If the Spirit is in us, then the

Spirit is giving life to this mortal frame of ours. As we open ourselves to the Spirit, the Spirit takes control. If we trust the Spirit, the Spirit will enliven us.

It's really hard for some people to surrender any kind of control of their lives, especially to a God whom they do not see in the form of a physical person. The temptation is great to rely on and trust the things we can see and feel. In fact, it may seem easier to rely on the things of the flesh; but when we face the truth, relying on the flesh leads us to doing and saying things that don't always leave us feeling so good about ourselves.

The parable of the Sower and the seed, which is another lectionary text for today goes hand-in-hand with what Paul is saying. Because believers are at different places in their spiritual journeys, fluctuating or battling with this tension between focusing on self or being fertile soil for the Spirit to fill and use, congregations also live with the tension. This tension can get in the way of God's work through the church. That's why believers need to worship together, study God's Word together, pray together, pray for one another. Believers need to build one another up instead of tearing one another down so that we will be flying free together with the Spirit to do God's work.

Congregations that allow this tension to move the direction of focusing on self, things of the flesh, will get in God's way. Churches can choke the life out of a seed that was planted by God. Churches may decide where they think the seed should be planted. Do we want it planted with people already on a path of following Christ? Do we want it to fall in ground that we are comfortable working in; or like Jesus, will we let the

seeds fall in any kind of ground? Will we nourish the new seedlings with supportive relationships and acceptance? Will we trust the Spirit to free us to do things in new ways, breaking outside of the box that keeps us comfortable? (I see it happening here.) Will we focus on the flesh—the unimportant things in our being together—or will we open ourselves and focus on the divine Spirit that will move us beyond ourselves and into our community?

One of our speakers at an Annual Conference several years ago was Dava Hensley, pastor at one of the churches in Roanoke (elected moderator-elect this year). I remember being moved by her message. She first shared her personal story which was a story of self-indulgence. Her life was controlled by alcohol and drug addiction, and she had spiraled into a dark pit.

Dava's life began to change because of a phone call made by a member of her church, which she never attended and had not attended for years. The caller asked her to help as a teacher for their Vacation Bible School. She was amazed that anyone would think she could do that, but she said yes anyhow. From that moment on she lived according to the Spirit and became a pastor.

The little congregation she serves is located in a bad neighborhood. Crime, drugs and alcohol abuse run rampant. The congregation is made up of mostly older adults. They thought about moving out of that location into a safer neighborhood. Members of the church wondered whether they had anything to offer the neighborhood they were in because they were all "too old" in their opinion, and they were afraid of the people in the church's neighborhood.

Somehow Dava convinced them that they had something to offer the neighborhood. God planted them there to do his work and the only things limiting them from doing God's work there were the limits they set on themselves, money and their age. They sought the help of the Spirit and the Spirit set them free.

I wish I could remember all of the ways that this small congregation began reaching the people in their neighborhood and changing lives. They held a vacation Bible school for more than a hundred children. They housed a food bank for those in need as well as the WIC program for mothers needing assistance with the care of their children. Dava went on and on

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with a list of things her congregation was doing in their community. They did not care what the soil was like, they helped plant and nourish the seeds, again and again and again, without expecting anything in return. People in the neighborhood met Jesus through the people of that congregation. I imagine with each successful step they took to help their community; they grew stronger and deeper in the Spirit. That is how it works.

In the end, the truth is that what we focus on—the things of the flesh or of the Spirit—will shape who we are and how we live as individuals and as a congregation. My prayer for all of us is that we will turn away from any temptations of the flesh and that we will repent when we fall down and live according to the flesh. I pray that we all will focus each and every moment of our lives on the Spirit, allowing it to dwell in us and to set us free to truly live and do God's will as each of us is called and as we are called as a congregation. What are our obsessions? Are they getting in the way of our relationship with God and the work God calls us to do? Amen