

Pentecost XII  
Romans 8:12-25a and selection from Bonhoeffer's sermon  
August 23, 2020  
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Many of you know I was raised in a family of active church-goers. I grew up attending Sunday worship weekly, as well Wednesday night dinners. I was a cradle Christian, so to speak. But during my college years, perhaps like many young adults, I shook off that inherited faith, wrestling with what I believed. Was Jesus really fully human, fully divine? How can one explain the sheer impossibility of a resurrection from the dead? What does prayer actually accomplish? My struggle stemmed from a universal human conundrum: If God is real, then why is the world so full of pain?

In this wrestling time I immersed myself in the stories of other people's conversions, looking for wisdom in how fellow human beings came to accept the saving power of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Madeline L'Engle resolved her struggle with the Incarnation because of the pastoral attentiveness of a local priest, who embodied the love of God to her. A friend's father was willing to share his dramatic conversation after years of skepticism; an overwhelming experience of Jesus's presence akin Paul's blinding light on the Damascus road. Later it was Kathleen Norris, a sophisticated skeptic who couldn't write off her life as a series of odd coincidences, instead realizing the steady hand of God in her return to her grandmother's land and the nuns' hearty welcome of her into their singing life of prayer.

And, lastly, it was the conversion of C. S. Lewis, the great British author. I was drawn to his life-story by the obvious Christian themes of Narnia. Lewis was only 10 years old when his mother died. Soon thereafter he was sent away to the harsh life of boarding school. At 13 he renounced the Christian faith of his childhood, declaring himself an atheist, an identity that stayed in place as he fought for Britain during the first World War. His return to Christ occurred gradually through a series of tiny, often reluctant steps of acknowledgement: acknowledgment of a power beyond him, that filled him with a longing for a more whole earth rather than the current one, which Lewis once called "a rather regrettable institution," an acknowledgement that the people who loved him lived by faith, and finally a surrender to an inner joy that Lewis could neither explain nor abandon, but that he came to recognize as Christ. All I can say, he concludes, is that one day "when we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did....It was more like when a man after a long sleep ...becomes aware that he is now awake." Here was one who knew death, war and isolation as well as friendship, books and beauty, who found himself drawn into – and transformed – by the Spirit of God, who worked trust, hope and life into spaces once defined by cynicism and sorrow.

The apostle Paul would call this "life in the Spirit," the sacred process by which the resurrected Jesus comes to guide those who believe. In his letter to the Romans Paul charges us to live in the Spirit. Let the Spirit dwell within you, he writes. Give the Spirit space to grow strong, enlarging your trust, deepening your faith, and bringing you to the edge of glory. It is a wonderful image, but how do we embrace this "life in the Spirit?"

First, the Spirit-led life lets go of the habits, thoughts, and practices that bend one toward death. This is what Paul is driving toward in his comparison of life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit. It's a confusing comparison, capable of misinterpretation, because we are embodied beings who live in our flesh. I, for one, have come to love God more deeply through such bodily actions as eating nourishing food, holding a sweet-smelling baby, or feeling ocean's waves wash over my toes. Paul is not saying bodily life is bad or needs to be wholly rejected. Instead he is employing the truth that human flesh does decay to encourage us to forgo those habits that feed only the ego or mindlessly satisfy the appetites without a larger sense of the community in which we all live.

The best analogy I have for Paul's distinction is the difference between the athlete who pursues a sport solely for glory of a championship ring, the adoration of a crowd, and the status of a star and the athlete who recognizes the ways years of early morning workouts, drills by a skilled coach, or the shared goals of team shape one's character, so that at the end what endures is not the fame, trophies or the money but the virtues of endurance, discipline, and teamwork. Live a life of the Spirit, says Paul. Pursue what endures. Life in the Spirit asks not what craving do I want to satisfy today, but what do I want my life to stand for, and in the end, who do I want to be?

It is the Spirit of God that enables us to live this way, assuring us of our status as children of God. You have been adopted into God's family, writes Paul. When the Spirit teaches you to pray Abba, Father, it gives a witness to your relationship as God's child, who is offered an inheritance through Christ. It's an odd image to use: heirs of God, who have an inheritance. Preacher Fleming Rutledge says, "An inheritance allows a person a degree of security, a degree of freedom, a degree of hope that he or she would not otherwise have."<sup>1</sup> Paul is saying: follower of Jesus, there is a secure account with your name upon it. Under your name are the words: child of God. The account overflows with grace, with power, with love. You inherit the Spirit of Jesus, raised from the dead.

Now an inheritance, continues Rutledge, brings with it, responsibility, often in the form of stewardship. Inheritances can be turned into charitable foundations, matching grants, and when put to this type of use many people benefit. Furthermore, human beings don't simply inherit money; we inherit traditions from our families, as well as personality traits. We inherit customs and cooking styles from our cultures. And not everything we inherit is good. So, concludes Rutledge, "Inheritance is a complex matter. We inherit the bad along with the good, the responsibility along with the privilege, the shame along with the pride."<sup>2</sup>

Paul says: "you are joint heirs with Christ, suffering with him so that you may be glorified with him." We inherit Christ's glory and his suffering. Jesus shaped his life around identifying with the suffering of others. Jesus sought out the despised tax collectors, the woman condemned of

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<sup>1</sup> Rutledge, Fleming, "Heirs of God" in *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons From Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 245.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 247.

adultery, the crowds without food, the parents without hope for their children's sickness. For his sharing in the suffering of others, Christ was crucified; himself suffering through a time in which he felt abandoned by God. We are inheritors of that suffering way. In the complex inheritance of being children of God – suffering accompanies the glory.

You and I can acknowledge the suffering that is happening around us. Life in the Spirit pushes us toward this suffering, not to be overwhelmed or defeated by it, not to resign ourselves to Lewis's assessment that the world is a "rather regrettable institution," but as those who have the inner security of God-given identity, the inner freedom of trusting nothing ever separates us from God, and the persistent hope that God's purposes, in the end, cannot be thwarted.

Suffering can make someone bitter, distrustful, angry, and shame-filled. It can twist one's soul, make one so prickly that others shy away, compounding the pain. In other moments, suffering – endured within the assurance of God's faithful Spirit - can build one's patience, increase one's endurance, strengthen one's prayer life, and hone one's eyes to see more clearly the grace infused in creation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us this. There is a pearl amid the suffering, a pearl of great price, the pearl of God's loving presence and nothing is more valuable than having such a singular belonging to God.

"I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to us," writes Paul, a bold statement from a man who knew imprisonment, beatings, ridicule, and a martyr's death. And the entire cosmos, Paul says, is watching us, followers of Jesus, for how we approach today's sufferings. The world longs to see in us the hope of God's future in how we handle the present day.

There is a common thread in the conversation stories that buoyed me through my journey in the land of doubt, struggle, and death. None of those who came to claim Jesus did so by themselves. They did not come to faith alone. Each had other faithful persons cross their paths, who showed them love, stood in solidarity in their pain, and freely shared their hope. Have you ever thought that your faithful life might be a stepping stone in another's faith in Jesus? Your life can be the source of hope for someone else. May we, heirs of Christ's suffering and glory, answer this call. Amen.