

## The Steward of the Soul

Romans 8:1-11

This is a stewardship sermon. Now relax; this isn't about money. This sermon is about the stewardship of our souls. And, no, I'm not redefining things just to sneakily get back to money, either. The fact is, this isn't a sermon about yours and my stewardship at all; it's about the stewardship work done in us by the Holy Spirit. Here's the thing, in this life, if we're going to live it as God intends, we need help; we need a steward, a manager, to direct us.

Now, that can be hard to hear in our individualist, "I'm totally my own person," society, but it's true nonetheless. And, when we're being honest with ourselves, we know it's true. That truth brings us to our Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans this morning. Here, the Apostle Paul contrasts what he calls life in the flesh with life in the Spirit. Don't be too hard on yourself if you found your mind wandering during the Epistle reading; it's a very difficult passage to get the mind around at one hearing. Not only is it filled with close reasoning, but much of what Paul says in these verses is tied to ideas he introduced in the previous chapter and, to some degree, to everything he has said from the beginning of this letter. That, by the way, is why it starts with the word, "Therefore..." Here's a good rule whenever you read a therefore in Scripture, always go back and find out what it's there for.

That said, here's the gist of what Paul is saying: there are two possible ways of living in this world: One is guided by our human nature, the other is guided by the Spirit of God. Paul describes the first by using the phrase "walking according to the flesh." But, he's not referring to the physical body here. Rather, he means our human nature, with its inclination to be self-serving, with its attachments to the immediate moment as opposed to the longer range. Left to its own devices, our human nature moves toward the lowering of standards, to the less rigorous or challenging path. Figuratively speaking, our human nature

would gladly go to the formal, white-tie and tails, banquet of life, happily wearing pajamas, and see no problem with that.

The other way of living, on the other hand, Paul says, is “walking according to the Spirit.” He is of course referring to the Holy Spirit, the indwelling power of God living in us. By listening to the direction of the Spirit, we can live in a way that is pleasing to God and life-giving for ourselves. That’s what Paul is saying here.

Clearly though, when two ways are put before us, we need to choose one or the other. Our spiritual ancestors understood this need. When I was growing up in the Church, I remember adults often speaking of seeking “holiness,” or “Godliness,” “total surrender,” or “the cure of the soul.” Sanctification is the official theological word for it. I like to mention that word, sanctification, because it is such a central concept of Anglican theology. It means that we can, with God’s help choose right; we can truly change. It literally means to become holy, to become more like Jesus. All these terms point to the same thing; what Paul means by “walking according to the Spirit.”

Of all these terms, “the cure of the soul” is the most useful for helping us understand this idea. Consider the meaning of cure. The first meaning listed in the dictionary is healing. Certainly, our souls need healing from the hurt that self-centered living has caused in our lives. Like that old Gospel tune quoted just last Sunday, “There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” But there is also a more dynamic meaning as well. To cure also means to perfect and to finish.

It’s like olives. Tree-ripened fruit is always supposed to be the best fruit there is, but an uncured tree-ripened olive is ghastly bad. I grew up in a farming community, and, well, I guess that this is something of a confession; once, when cousins from the city visited, my friends and I led them on a tree-ripened fruit adventure through the orchards around us. They loved it. Most tree-ripened fruit, just picked, is

wonderful. But then we had them pick the olives. My unsuspecting cousins chomped down, and, well, the gagging, retching, and shrieking sounds were quite a payoff.

Perhaps I've strayed from the point here. The point is olives need curing and so do our souls. As Christians we are to grow in our faith in such a way that we discover who we really are, what we are intended to be and do, and to search out the riches of the best of our God-created humanity. In that curing process our souls, our lives, become more and more a reflection of Christ's life. That's what curing the soul really means.

There was a time when every parish church was called a cure and every priest was understood to be a curate. When my father was in seminary some eighty years ago, every seminarian was required to take classes in the Cure of the Soul. It was understood back then that guiding the people of a parish into growing and perfecting their souls was among the most important things a priest or pastor could be about. Today, if we use the term curate at all, it's relegated to the youth pastor. We seldom speak of being sanctified or of going on to Christlikeness. But that is the most important personal work of the Christian life, of walking the narrow path that leads to a fulfilled life in God's loving presence. Staying on that path, the one that leads to a fulfilled human and Godly life, though, is a difficult struggle.

It requires course correction. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit is our steward/ manager, guiding us in how to walk toward goodness, godliness, Christlikeness; being cured.

So, what is this curing supposed to look like? What is this cured fruit that is the evidence of the curing of our souls? I'm so glad you asked. The most concise description of that fruit is found in a list in Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter five, verses 16 through 26. Actually, there are two lists here. The first list of fruit starts in verse 19. It's the

list of most of the behaviors and character flaws inherent in living according to our flesh, our human nature; living like uncured olives. It's what the Holy Spirit's presence in us cures our souls from. That list reads: "...impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and," (just in case something got missed there, Paul adds,) "things like these." In other words, things that keep us from having a closer relationship with God, and keep us from having the healthy relationships we desire with others. It's a tall order, but remember, we're asking the Holy Spirit to supply the curative power from within us to change any of these things that may be part of our particular "way of the flesh." Now, this isn't just a personal inquisition. Negative behaviors and character flaws have to be replaced by something positive if growth is to happen, if curing is to take place. So, Paul supplies the cured fruit list as well.

If you've been listening to my sermons this year, then you probably already know this list; you may even have it memorized. This list of positive behaviors and character traits starts in verse 22, and reads: "...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

That's the fruit of Christlikeness...that's the evidence of a curing soul stewarded by the Spirit. We can't do this curing without help. We need each other, for encouragement, and, most of all, we need the steward of our souls, the Holy Spirit, to make it happen. So, here's how to start, the first step to take: ask the Spirit to help you grow the cured fruit in you. The Holy Spirit is already in you and is just awaiting your desire to be cured. The steward of our souls will empower you and me to walk the walk, sanctify/cure our souls, and lead us into deep, life-giving joy. Hey, if curing is good for olives, it'll work for you and me.