

“Way of the Self or Way of the Spirit?”

Pentecost 6, Romans 8:1-11

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The Solution Is Life on God’s Terms

8 ¹⁻² With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ’s being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. 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.

³⁻⁴ God went for the jugular when he sent his own Son. He didn’t deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that.

The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn’t deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.

⁵⁻⁸ Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but

never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God’s action in them find that God’s Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn’t pleased at being ignored.

⁹⁻¹¹ But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won’t know what we’re talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God’s terms. It stands to reason, doesn’t it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he’ll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ’s!

I. WHAT’S HAPPENING HERE?

I don’t have to tell you that we live in “interesting times.” Okay, interesting is a mild world. Precarious?

Prophetic? Provoking? Seemingly impossible at times? Certainly divisive and dismaying, discouraging and depressing.

We have come up with more things to argue and spat about than ever—even while we have a common enemy that's not even human and we ought to be gathered up in a unified fight against—a virus!

Our dividing lines, even in an election season, have become more varied and affect every aspect of life. No longer just a difference in political party or “more conservative” vs. more liberal, different wings (left or right), different news channels or news feeds.

We are hurting as a human race, and hurting one another. I have wondered, as I look around and listen to what's going on—even listen to my friends and family—if the real, root, dividing line doesn't very basic—do we and our policies—our political life together in community—show compassion for our fellow humans and creatures, or do they not?

Can it really be that simple? Do we make decisions based on compassion for others, or do we not?

Paul calls it living in the Way of the Self or the Way of the Spirit. Self-focused or God-focused.

I wonder about it and wonder if we might explore that together—today and in the coming weeks.

Do we divide ourselves—our words and actions into such basic categories—Compassion for fellow human beings or not?—or is that too simple-minded in a complex world, with such differing walks of life, that we really can't understand others who are so different and think differently than we do?

II. PRO-ARGUERS—RACISM AND COVID

A. Argue about Racism

For instance, we are amazing arguers—here and everywhere! We argue about racism and its roots and our own involvement in it. Whether it's an individual stance or a structural, systemic sea that we're all just a part of and can't do anything about.

We can argue about “what's all in good, harmless fun.” “What does a symbol symbolize?” We argue as white people that “we don't have privilege because we have a hard life too.” That “we are just honoring our heritage and history” when we celebrate our past—no matter how violent and destructive.

I submit that Compassion responds to these questions and arguments: But, at the end of the day, is it hurtful to another human being?

Looking out through the eyes of my brother and sister—of a different color than I, or different faith tradition, or altogether different life experience and journey—*“Does it hurt their heart and make them feel diminished or degraded or afraid—to see a symbol, a post, a picture, a memorial, a statue, a flag?”*

It might be “heritage” or a “sign of honor or pride”—but whose heritage and pride in what? In the degradation, cruelty and dehumanizing of another?

How does it make you feel to see such a symbol? How does it make you feel, if you are standing in another’s shoes, in someone else’s skin, looking in from the margins? From beyond the circle of the Welcome Table?

B. Argue about Masks

We argue about masks! About whether to protect one another from harm—and what the best way to do that is.

Dr. Fauci laments on the news: “I cannot convince you that you need to CARE for one another.”

We can argue until the cows come home about what the CDC really advised when, and whether they really help or not, BUT if there’s the slightest chance that we could save a life or save a fellow human being (or 100) from a lot of misery and suffering, then why would we debate?

“Love your neighbor as you do yourself. Treat your neighbor as you would want them to treat you.” It’s right there in Jesus #1 Guideline.

A glance through the Chaffee County Times ads—classified ads are FULL of pleas for wearing masks: “if you come to my garage sale, please wear a mask!”

A friend of ours and the church recently opened a business downtown, and came to us in tears one day, so upset that the request to wear a mask in her store was being met with such vitriol! She wasn’t trying to take away anyone’s rights—she was trying to save lives!

DOES it all come down to Compassion? Can it really be that simple? Is the Way of the Self vs. the Way of the Spirit primarily a difference in choosing “what’s best for me and mine” at every turn, vs. “what’s best for all?” Is the common good broad enough? Is it really the “common good for all,” or do we always have to choose some concerns and groups of the population over others.

III. ROCKY ROAD FOR ME

Challenging racism —been a rocky road for me

True confessions! I’ve had a difficult month or two! God has broken my heart wide open, awakened me to the cries of my brothers and sisters of color and many other marginalized groups—in profound and sleep-disturbing ways.

I have sought to learn everything I could. Too reflect on my own internalized racism, privilege and unexamined bias. To admit boldly, that I too, am a racist—even though I’ve *never* thought of myself that way—because I’m a good person who loves people of color and on the margins, and have stood up for equality my entire life.

But. But, I've recently learned that it's not enough. Just to be a good person and not cause problems for others. A much more active, intentional *involvement* is called for—now more than ever. I must be silent no more, complacent no more, fearful no more to challenge systems and messages wherever I find them.

But. But, I'm finding it's not that easy. And certainly my passion is not always received well, or welcomed as much as I might assume! It's humbling. And causes *more* inner reflection and prayer and careful communicating of my feelings, thoughts, beliefs and challenging of injustice.

An example:

Last week my passion for justice and dismantling racism flared like the fireworks on the 4th of July. There, driving by my house, in a parade—supposedly celebrating Independence Day and good patriotism—was a Confederate Flag—waved by a child. As a black young man, who is my neighbor, rode his bike past our house.

I was SO upset. So angry. I felt violated—on my street, watching from my yard, as my own neighbors were witness to a symbol of hate right in here in BV.

My internal sense of right and wrong, and the long-ingrained, parent-imported passion for fighting injustice stirred in me after decades of too much silence. And, as my heart and anger were broken open, so were my filters. I became one of the “arguers” that I

try not to be. I went toe-to-toe with friends and family and people I don't even know.

Clarke had to reign me in, and I had to go for long prayers walks in God's beautiful creation and our Labyrinth, and calm down.

Others came alongside in better, calmer ways, and set a better example for me. They asked gentle questions of the community: “How does seeing that confederate flag in our town make you feel?” “It is a symbol of hate.”

So, I spent the week asking myself: How do I channel that anger and dismay into dialogue? Into learning together about the history and symbols and systems that have been used for harm for centuries? Into standing up for compassion, mercy and standing alongside the least of these—*without* furthering the divides already rampant in our world, country and local community?

How do I know when to stay silent, and when to be “silent no more.” That is the struggle for all of us who call ourselves Christians in these times. In all times, of course, but in these times even more so. Silence is siding with sinful oppression when used at the wrong time. Loud Loving—like our beautiful banner at CUCC proclaims: Love is Still the Way—is the call of Christ for our community.

The trick is—and our prayer must always be—how to love loudly without shutting down dialogue. Without alienating one another and furthering the divides.

And the song came to me:
“*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me*”

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT—TODAY!

Peter Marty: One of the unspoken privileges of being white in America is the privilege to assume that racism is not a pressing topic.

Here’s what the Christian faith helps me know and reminds me to tell my most defensive-minded friends: look, you have some **tools in the toolbox of your faith** life that are exciting to put to work in our world of racial inequity. Start by letting go of the **defensiveness**. That’s a must. It’s a constrictive survival response that only separates you from God.

According to Jesus, relinquishment is a ticket to abundant life. Reexamining personal behaviors and perspectives isn’t just a Lenten project. We no longer have the luxury of living racially unaware lives.

...relax into the power of faith. Do some soul searching. Take what scares the heck out of you about yourself and pick it up, much like that cross Jesus mentions. Then, move your ego aside, much like that denying of self that Jesus commands. And live! Live with the mind of Christ, humbly open to changing all that needs to be changed about you and your world.”

(Peter Marty in *The Christian Century*, *Becoming less defensive about white privilege*)

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PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL

We are at a pivotal moment in our life together as a congregation—the Body of Christ in this time and place. Our wider community is also at a pivotal juncture.

Will we allow the Spirit to work in us and through us, or rely on our own efforts—like Paul says—which will wear us out! To look to the “way we’ve always done things—the clinging to an idealized past that never really was, and was excluding and discriminating of any outside the mainstream, regardless.

Will we let the wind of the Spirit blow into and through and out of us in powerful ways—use the Tools in the Toolbox of our Faith and put our tools and ourselves to work, plunging into the God Path—listening for the Spirit’s calling us forward, in faith and in trust?

To move from being Homo Sapiens to Homo Spiritus, as one writer put it!

Not just to address the loudest issues of *this* current time—Combatting Covid and Dismantling Racism—but to allow the Spirit to lead us in the Compassion Path for *all* time—into our promised and Spirit-led vital and life-bringing future for all—as individuals, church, community, world?

LOUD LOVERS AND COMPASSIONATE CHRISTIANS

“I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees.”

~ Anne Lamott

Let’s turn our lives over—more fully than we ever have—to the Way of the Spirit—God’s Way, and see where that Way takes us! Together, in Loud Love and Beloved Community.

PRAYER for this Week:

God, our Creator and Source, gather us in, your children, in these challenging times. Hold us close to your heart, as we hold one another close. Where there is loneliness, depression, and dismay, bring us as

healing balm to one another. Where there is division and disagreement about how best to love our neighbor and our communities, make us channels of your peace. Where there is oppressive silence, help us to be loud Love-bearers. Where there are too many storms that disturb our soul, bring us peace, calm and comfort, knowing You’ve got the whole world in your hands, and you’ve got us too! Amen.