

Romans 8:1-11 NRSV

Message: Kintsugi

Our passage is one that most of us have heard in one form or another. Some of us remember the first verse well, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” However, the rest of the passage then disappears in a conglomeration of spirit verses law and spirit verses flesh. How we treat the rest of this passage greatly influences how we understand that first verse and this is what we are going to try and get to the bottom of today.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is one of the undisputed letters of Paul. For those that do not know, not every letter in the New Testament that claims Paul’s authorship is written by Paul. The context of the letter to the Romans is that Paul is trying to find a base of operation so that he can start churches and minister in the western half of the Mediterranean Sea. The church of Rome is not a church that he founded. Tradition credits Peter with that. However, as with most traditional things there is little evidence of this. More than likely the church of Rome was founded after the Pentecost event as some people from Rome were probably present and went home to find their own church.

In the letter to the Romans Paul is laying out a fairly detailed theological testimony of his beliefs and structures. This is one of the reasons that Romans remain so important to this day. It is by no means a comprehensive theological treaty or systematic theology, but it is very detailed on somethings. An important item that we need to note before we get into some of the details I want to look at is that Paul is a highly educated individual. First Paul would have been educated in the Jewish tradition of the time. He was knowledgeable enough to be among those stoning Stephen, meaning he was familiar with the law and the theological outlook of Judaism. After his conversion, many scholars believe Paul basically goes back to school. They get this from the depth that Paul is able to speak about Greek and Roman philosophy, history, and general thought.

For our reflection today there are several things I want to look at to help us understand what is going on in this passage. First is word choice. Second is translation choice and finally what is Christ actually doing. The first two sections are going to help us with the third.

Word choice -

There is good reason that most of us focus on the first verse of this passage. That is the wording comparing flesh and spirit. On a surface level reading, the “I can just read it and its in black and white” level of understanding, this passage seems to argue that the physical life is bad. That when we have faith in Christ, we are adopting a perspective that

says the ultimate goal is the spiritual life and heaven. This “black and white” reading does a number of disservices. First, it doesn’t understand Jewish faith tradition. Judaism has long been defined by the importance of the body. Hence the idea of the resurrection. The Pharisees and Sadducees argued about this. For Pharisees the resurrection is important because it shows that God values our bodies, the Sadducees, however, didn’t believe in the bodily resurrection. Religiously speaking the Pharisees were far more numerous and in our case of looking at Paul, Paul is a self-proclaimed Pharisee. The proof of Christ resurrection being one of the things that Paul is passionate about means that to say this is a rejection of the physical body would just not work from everything we know about Paul.

Reminder, Paul is classically educated and trained for his day. This means he would have also been familiar with Greek philosophy particularly Plato and neo-platonic thought. Neo-platonic thought claims that there is dualism between body and spirit. They are against each other. However, Paul rejects that and it comes through in his word choice. The word Paul uses here is *sarx*, which is translated flesh, not the word *soma* which is translated as body. Paul is using the word flesh as shorthand to the powerful influences of evil in the world. Not primarily to the ones directly tied to the physical body but to the powers and principalities that influence the world around the believer. So, this is not a rejection of the *soma*, body, it is a rejection of the forces of the world that influence us away from good spiritual things.

An example of this today might be social media. Social media is good for some things. For instance, I can keep in contact and share pictures with widespread family. However social media can also be evil. Just look at the ethnic cleansing that Facebook was tied to in Indonesia or the rise of right-wing ideology and racism. So, depending on my choice of words I could be talking about the same media but in different manners where it is either positive or negative.

Translation choice –

The next facet of this passage I want to look at is translation choice. Ultimately what we are trying to see is what is Paul trying to teach us about a relationship with Christ. How passages are interpreted can influence this greatly.

When we talk about what Jesus is doing when Jesus saves us there are two options in this passage one is that it is possible that Jesus is righteous, and what Paul is suggesting is that Jesus took on your sin in his righteousness and died for you essentially covering you with his righteousness. This has been a traditional protestant interpretation of this passage. The second option is that there is what is called an ontological change. (Ontological means a question of existence.) This claims that Jesus changes us through his love. There isn’t any

covering with righteousness it is just that Jesus loves us so much that it changes the nature of reality. This interpretation for what Jesus is doing is a traditionally catholic interpretation of this passage.

So, we just started to touch on what is Jesus doing. How did we get there? Well, it kind of comes down to translating a phrase. In verse three it states "...by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh..." The little phrase is "to deal with sin." Now we are starting with the NRSV translation here and this supports the idea that when Christ saved us it was to deal with sin, and to deal with sin it is because of the love of Christ. The NIV however translates this phrase as "to be a sin offering". This supports a translation of penal substitutionary atonement. This is the idea that Jesus in his righteousness replaces you on the cross.

Which translation is right? This is why translations are important. Technically the Greek works in either translation so we have to make a theological choice. I make the choice for the fact that Jesus loves you so much that he changed the very nature of the world in love to be in relationship with you.

What is Christ doing –

This leads us to final part. What is Christ doing, and this is the good news, quite literally. We are reconciled to Christ, made free in Christ, not because he took punishment for you but because he loved you so much that his free choice was to try and heal you.

I wrestled with analogies this week to show you what is going on. What I believe is going on is akin to Japanese Kintsugi. You may have seen this on social media, but it is where an object like a teacup is broken and rather than throwing it out artisans repair it. In Japan this is done using gold to fill in the cracks. Instead of hiding the brokenness the brokenness becomes a part of the beauty of the object.

This whole passage builds around the idea that we are made free in Christ. We are made free because Christ brings us to wholeness. Wholeness does not erase our flaws or brokenness but instead redeems it as a work of art. The good news today is that Christ has redeemed you. There is nothing you can do to earn it. You are not called to reject your life or this existence in favor of a future one. You are not under threat of punishment that you should have gotten. Instead, you are invited into a redeeming relationship that calls you to new life and life abundantly. If you have never made a decision to live that life, I encourage you to do so today. Step into a relationship with a God that loves you rather than judges you. I guarantee it will make all the difference in your life. Amen.