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Genesis 28:10-19a, Romans 8:1-17  
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“The Spirit Within”

When I was a child, my mother like all mothers had a particular way of getting the attention of her children. My mother was a gracious lady who was normally very soft-spoken. She had five children close in age, four of whom were boys. When she wanted to call me, she would use my name in a gentle tone of voice, “Lewis, come here please.” If I failed to respond or if she might be in need of me to correct some misbehavior or prank, she would call out a bit more firmly and add my middle name, “Lewis Free, you come here.” If I failed to respond to this summons, she would call out with great conviction and force, “Lewis Free Galloway, come here now!” When I heard my full name called out like that, she had my full attention.

Paul wants to get our attention at the beginning of the eighth chapter of his Letter to the Romans. The opening words mark a turning point in his thought. Paul could say, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” He doesn’t. Paul could say, “Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” He doesn’t say that either. Paul could say, “Now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” He doesn’t say that. He wants our full attention. Paul puts it all together and says emphatically, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

In the earlier parts of his letter to the Romans, Paul invites us to understand that we have been put in a right relationship with God not through our own efforts but through the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. God in Christ has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves and what no one else can do for us. When we sin, we hurt ourselves, we wound others and we deface creation. At the most fundamental level, our sin arises out of our alienation from God and breaks God’s image in us. Only God can lift the burden of sin from us. God has lifted the burden and set us free. Therefore, Paul declares with all the force he can: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

You may remember the film *The Mission* which came out a number of years ago. *The Mission* is an intense portrayal of the struggle of faith and culture in colonial South America. One of the main characters is a soldier named Rodrigo Mendoza, who had worked as a Spanish mercenary fighting brutally against the Guarani Indians. In the movie Rodrigo undergoes a religious conversion and seeks to do penance for the terrors he, in his old life, has inflicted upon the native population. In one dramatic scene that takes place after his conversion, Mendoza is climbing up the face of an enormous cliff to reach the Guarani. On his back he is carrying a huge net filled with his heavy old armor and his weapons of war. Exhausted from the climb, he finally reaches the top. At the top of the cliff, one of the Guarani cuts the cord that ties him to the huge net and his past life of violence. He is set free from the burden of his past life. Only those we have hurt have the

power to forgive us and set us free from the sin that ties us down. Only God can cut the cord that binds us to our sin and give us new life.

This life flows from the presence of the God's Spirit within us. Through faith we come to experience this new life that is ours in Jesus Christ. Paul describes this new life as *living according to the Spirit*.

In the opening verses, Paul's words are filled with images that reveal the contrast between *living according to the flesh* and *living according to the Spirit*. Those who live according to the flesh are bound; those who live according to the Spirit are free. To grasp Paul's message we need to understand his use of the words *flesh* and *spirit*. To Paul, the word *flesh* does not refer primarily to our physical selves as we might think. The contrast between *flesh* and *spirit* for Paul is not the same thing as the body/spirit duality of Greek thought. Paul is not saying that bodily or physical existence is bad and spiritual existence is good. Paul Achtemeier has written, "The words 'flesh' and 'spirit' [do] not designate two parts of human nature but rather...represent two ways of living" (*Romans: Interpretation Commentary*, p. 131-2). To live according to the flesh is to live a life that is dominated by the desires and will of the sinful self. *Flesh* is Paul's shorthand expression for the totality of sinful human existence in rebellion against God. The human mind, spirit and body can be servants of the flesh if they do not live for God. We are all aware that sin is not just a matter of the body. How easy it is for our minds to fall captive to the sin of pride, prejudice, hatred and greed.

We are set free to live according to the Spirit. Such a life recognizes God as Creator and Christ as Lord. To live according to the Spirit is to move from the dominion of sin to the freedom of faith. It is to live as a child of God and fellow heir with Christ. It is to live a Christ-centered rather than a self-centered life. Human life is marked by paradox: the more independent and self-reliant we think we are, the more likely we are to be bound in sin; the more bound we are to God, the freer we become.

Isaac had two sons, twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright and his father's blessing. To escape his brother's wrath, Jacob had to flee from his family and everything familiar. On his way to his uncle Laban, Jacob fell asleep and had a dream. He dreamed he saw a ladder reaching into heaven and the angels of God descending and ascending upon the ladder. God came to him and promised to give him the land upon which he slept. God promised to be with him wherever he went. When Jacob woke from his dream, he declared that God was in that place and he had not known it. Jacob, a man on the run, was bound to his fear. He found new peace and freedom through the knowledge that God was with him.

Jacob called the name of the place Bethel, which means the house of God. Centuries later, the kings of Israel would build a temple at Bethel. It would become the place where the people met with God. Now Paul says that the Spirit of God is not confined to any one place or any building made with human hands. The Spirit of God is within us. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ present with us so that we might be children of God. Our true life, our freedom and our peace are found in Jesus Christ.

I have known people who have come to an awareness of God and of their redemption in Jesus Christ, but who do not realize they are truly free. Faith is more than a matter of intellectual assent to certain theological propositions about God; faith is a matter of personal trust in God. Faith is the assurance that the spiritual realities those propositions represent are real. When we say, “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting,” we are speaking of the spiritual realities that define our lives. We are proclaiming that we live in the power of the Holy Spirit, that we are a part of the body of Christ, and that we live by the forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness of the sins of others. Even though we continue to live in a world that is characterized by rebellion and death, we have confidence that God will give life to our mortal bodies and raise us to new life with Jesus Christ in the world to come. The Spirit within leads us to trust this word of God’s liberating grace and sets us free to live for God.

In his prize winning book *Parting the Waters*, Taylor Branch writes of the civil rights movement in America. During the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King was speaking to a church crowded with two thousand worshippers. He was explaining the legal challenges around the bus boycott. He was tired and his efforts sagged. When he finished, an old lady known as Mother Pollard came up to see him at the front of the church. She was one of the heroes of the boycott because she refused, in spite of her advanced age, to accept rides that were offered to her. She spoke to Dr. King, “Come here, son.” She embraced him and told him that she knew something was troubling him because he didn’t speak with his usual strength and conviction that night. Dr. King denied that there was any problem and asserted that he was feeling fine. Mother Pollard said that he couldn’t fool her. She knew that something was wrong. She moved her face closer to his and said that she had told him that the people were with him. Even if they weren’t with him that God was going to take care of him. (*Parting the Waters*, p. 164) It was her words that gave him the courage to go on. It was that very night that his home in Montgomery was bombed.

Through the power of the indwelling Spirit, we have a new relationship with God. We, who were strangers to God and alienated from God, have become God’s children. God has put God’s own Spirit within us to testify that we belong to God. Paul says that when we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit within us bearing witness to our own spirits that we are children of God. When we find ourselves searching for God or crying out to God in our doubt, anguish or pain, it is the very Spirit of God crying out within us. Our longing for God in times of need is the very evidence we have of the presence of God’s Spirit within us. What looks to all the world like weakness may be the beginning of new strength. The Spirit comes to us, calms our fears and gives us power to live as God’s children.

I do not know what challenges you face in your life, what difficulties you have to overcome, what struggles weigh heavy upon your heart. Listen for the voice of God’s own Spirit crying within you, “Abba! Father!” linking your life to the life of God. The Spirit is within you to calm your fears, set you free and give you new power to live as God’s children.