

HPTFTU

Romans 8: 1-11

There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

There is an acronym I once bumped into in a book on Spirituality. It was HPTFTU, or the Human Propensity To “Fumble” Things Up. The HPTFTU seems to simply be part of our human condition. I mean, have you ever *thought* we were being helpful only to realize we were only making the situation worse? Or maybe in our mind we thought we were being faithful, only to one day realize that we made God too small. Or perhaps when speaking with someone something slips out that was offense or inappropriate and we had no idea. Anyone?

It is our HPTFTU—our human propensity to fumble things up that St. Paul refers to as “the flesh.” That as human beings, even after being given a bunch of commandments by God on how to live in decent harmony together, even *that* can be fumbled up and used as a tool to judge, control, and shame other people. Even the gift of the Bible can be used as a weapon of mass destruction. Anyone? Even with something which is clearly meant to open us up and free us, we can be fumble it up and use it to justify our own self-interests and judgements.

Not only that, but being “in the flesh” also means that we are all products of the environment we grow up in. For example, I grew up in a pretty tame, mainly white suburb in Chicago. I also grew up in a toxically sexist society who taught me to fear people who were different than I was. Nobody had to say anything, it was in the air, on the television shows I watched, promoted in the megachurch youth group I attended. Nobody had to say anything—it just was. Now naturally, I don't want this for my children, so we work really hard at trying to undo what society teaches them. But I remember when one of our kiddos was only two years old. I was taking the dog for a walk around the block, carrying our two-year-old with me, to give mom a break. A few houses down we walked past a couple of neighbors who were taking their evening stroll as well. They happened to be African American. As we approached them, the kiddo buried their head into my chest like they were afraid. I said, “What's wrong?” They whispered, “I don't like them.”

Now as someone who is trying to undo these racist stereotypes the inside of me was going “Arrgh!” But I calmly asked, “What don’t you like about them?” The child just said, “I’m scared because they are different.”

Now I confess I was puzzled...wondering where did this child get this reaction from at only two-years old? Surely it wasn’t from me! But then I realized: we live in the majority white side of town, in a majority white neighborhood. The kid goes to a majority white preschool, and we belong to a majority white church. Not to mention the cartoons on television and the story books have mostly white characters. Where did this kid learn this from? Nobody has to say anything, it’s in the air—which is why we hear Black people say, “I can’t breathe.”

Social consciousness is formed by our social constructs. And because of our HPTFTU, we aren’t always aware of how we are being formed or why. We all have blind spots and thoughts, or half-baked opinions and the inappropriate comments...well, they slip out of us. I believe this is what St. Paul is referring to here as being “in the flesh.” It’s just in us.

But then he reminds us that it’s not our central identity—who we really are is in the Spirit. Which means we function inside of a healing and restorative reality. We model a caring and sensitive way. We aren’t asked to be ashamed of who we are or where we came from—there is no condemnation in Christ—but it does ask us to be honest about who we are and the constructs that have shaped us. We are set free to make mistakes and learn from them. We are free to fumble things up and then say, “Maybe that wasn’t such a good idea!” We can have difficult conversations and do hard things because it’s safe and there is grace. After all, the first step to recovery is admitting there is a problem. Then the next 11 steps are doing something about it.

When St. Paul writes about this, the “you” is always plural. This is something that gets worked out as a community since we help form and influence each other. So we are going to make this a condemnation free zone. And you are going to get into your groups and *share about the environment you grew up in. Maybe it was in your household, or perhaps it was a message you received from society. And then share what your process has been like to recover from that.* We can become each other’s support group in that way...because we are not only capable of fumbling things up, but we are also capable of healing and working together to co-create a different reality. Amen.