

Sermon, July 23, 2023

Romans 8:12-25
“Cry, Abba Father”

To best understand the meaning of a biblical text requires an understanding of the terminology used, which in Paul's case may be different than our own interpretation. An example would be Paul's use of the words, 'body' and 'flesh'. Although our biological existence can play a part in what he is saying, to live according to the flesh has to do with a certain approach to life. As one biblical scholar put it, "...for Paul, "flesh" means not exclusively, or even primarily, our physical bodies, but rather an orientation to our world which is dominated by rebellion and sin...". (Achte-meier) In other words, to live according to the flesh is to live in rebellion towards God. To lead lives that are dominated by things such as greed, self-centeredness, the lust for power, prejudice and discrimination, advocacy for violence, to name just a few, is to live in the flesh, and , consequently , in rebellion towards God.

So, when Paul says, " for if you live according to the flesh you will die", he is not talking about physical death, but a spiritual form of death. And when he says, "but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live", he is referring to the New Life that we find in the Spirit of Christ. As he states earlier in chapter 8, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds of the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit".

Further on , Paul writes, "When we cry "Abba, Father", it is that very Spirit bearing witness with all your spirit that we are children of God". So, what does it mean to call God, "Abba ,Father"?

Well, as you know, the New Testament was originally written in Greek. To be more specific, Koine Greek, which is a bit different than classical Greek. Koine Greek is what we may call the language of the streets. However, it is generally accepted that Jesus spoke a dialect called Aramaic, and Abba is an Aramaic word for father, but it has a particular connotation. It is akin to referring to God as 'papa' or 'daddy'. What this suggests is that when we live according to the Spirit , we have a rather intimate relationship with God. God is not some far off, distant entity, not an old man with a long white beard sitting on a throne somewhere off in the heavens, but a Spirit that is as close to us as our own breathe.

But we must be careful and recognize that words have a power of their own. For example, in my first congregation there was a woman in her mid- seventies who shuddered at the thought of calling God 'Father'. Why? Because when she was a child, her biological father was both mentally and physically abusive, and so she equated the word 'father' with meanness and cruelty, and then by association she came to see God as mean and cruel. For her to see herself as a child of God would be terrifying.

But God's gender is not at issue when we cry, Abba, Father. It is, again, a term that is symbolic of our relationship with God when we choose to live according to the Spirit. We realize that we are embraced not by a God of wrath, but a God of love, in fact, a God who is love. I will be speaking to that at greater length in next week's sermon.

To call God 'Abba, Father', and us " children of God" , emphasizes the fact that the Church is a family, that we are drawn into a community of mutual concern. We look to one another as brothers and sisters and attend to the needs of one another. Of course, all families have their internal squabbles, which over the centuries has led to the unfortunate divisions within the Body of Christ, but somehow, we have to come to the realization that our differences of opinion can blind us to the fact that we are bound by one Spirit and can lead us back into life in the flesh where mutual concern changes into mutual condemnation.

I agree with Paul that in the Spirit we are called to a particular way of life, but I also believe that the Spirit of God is not the exclusive property of the Christian Church. In the words of Desmond Tutu, "...the basis of the egalitarianism of the Bible (is) that all belongs to God and that all are of equal worth in His sight". At the end of today's reading Paul speaks of hope, and my hope is that there will come a day when we truly embrace the idea of a human family - a family in which we can all see one another as brother and sister - a world in which not only the barriers that divide the church come crashing down , but one in which the dignity of all human beings are upheld, and all are perceived as children of God! Amen

Let us pray: Abba Father, we rejoice in the fact of your love for us, for others, and for the whole of Creation, and we pray that that love be made a reality in us, that in and through your Spirit we may be a transformative force in the world. Forgive us for those times when we succumb to the life of the flesh, clinging to attitudes that bring great harm into the world, unleashing the powers of greed, and hatefulness, and violence. Help us to follow the example of your Son Jesus, bringing into the world healing, reconciliation, peace, justice , and love, not just within the Church, but for all of humankind. Looking at the world through the eyes of Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, help us to recognize the brotherhood and sisterhood that you desire as we struggle for greater unity in the world.