

12

Jul

Set the Mind

Core Faith

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

Romans 8 invites us to wake up each day with our minds set on Christ, discovering life and peace not through self-centered striving but by letting the Spirit shape how we see, live, and love in the world.

REFERENCES

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalm 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: Romans 8:1-11*Woke up this mornin' with my mind, stayed on Jesus.**Woke up this mornin' with my mind, stayed on Jesus.**Woke up this mornin' with my mind, stayed on Jesus.**Hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah.*

“Woke Up This Mornin’”, African American Traditional, Public Domain

A traditional approach to the letter to the Romans is to declare that it is Paul's most coherent systematic theology. It is presented as his introduction to the Christians in Rome, a theological resume, if you will. Even if that is true, it is not merely an academic exercise for Paul. Instead, as with all his writing and preaching, it is an invitation into the new life in Christ. Paul carries his faith, his invitational faith, on his sleeve and shows it, offers it, gives it away every chance he gets. We could argue that he didn't set out to build a church, an institution, but to make disciples of Jesus Christ. And not only does he issue an invitation, but he also describes a process. In other words, he doesn't just give us the "what"; he gives us the "how."

"Set your mind," says Paul. That is a part of the process. But what is all this "flesh and spirit" stuff? We need to wrestle with this to understand how we become disciples of Jesus Christ. There are many of these polarities in the Bible, and Paul is particularly fond of using them. But we need to hear them for what they are, not make surface assumptions about the intent. In our text for this week, we have the duality of flesh versus spirit. It seems straightforward enough, particularly when Paul identifies flesh with the adjective "sinful." So, we know the attitude we need to take toward each of these polarities. But what is he pointing toward here? Flesh seems like corporality, like bodies, like the tangible life we live every day. Some hear this text saying that our whole lives, caring for our bodies, living the human pleasures that are given to us, are somehow bad, evil, or sinful. That anything bodily is a distraction from the pure life of the spirit.

To hold such a position would be a denial of Incarnation. The fact that God chose to be born in the flesh of a human baby and live the human life with all its needs and gifts is an antidote to the idea that bodies are inherently sinful. Further, to use this polarity as an excuse not to care for an individual's or a community's physical well-being would be counter to the declaration from Jesus himself that to care—to physically care—for the "least of these" is to care for him.

So, what is the polarity that Paul is drawing attention to in this text? It is hard to simplify this rich theological proposition with a single statement, but Paul himself uses the phrase "set your mind" as the key to understanding. What does it mean to set our minds? Is he talking about a fixation? Is he saying that over-observing any one thing is the problem? Well, kind of, but not really. It isn't about a fixation; it is more like a filter or a lens through which we approach the world. The question Paul asks is, "Are you the center of your world, or is God in Christ?" This isn't a call to neglect oneself, however. But it is a call to have a proper perspective on life, to set one's mind according to the Spirit, to seek God's will in all things, to see what would benefit the community and world, not just oneself.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. That is Paul's argument, the proposition. But it isn't a club to which we gain membership. Instead, it is a way of living, a way of being in the world. There is no condemnation for those who seek Christ's will in all things. There is no condemnation for those who seek the healing, the caring, the uniting that Christ sought. There is no condemnation for those who take up the towel and basin to care for neighbors. There is no condemnation for those ... well, you get the idea.

This is where life is, says Paul, setting your mind on Christ. "I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus," says the spiritual. "No condemnation with my mind stayed on Jesus," says another verse. "Can't hate your neighbor with your mind stayed on Jesus," in another. "Devil can't catch you in your mind stayed on Jesus." Paul says to set the mind of the flesh (on the self as the center of all your thinking) is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6 NRSV).

You are not "in the flesh." Maybe Paul gives us more credit than we deserve here. At my best, I'll agree. At other times, well, the flesh is awfully seductive, drawing me away from the better angels of my mind. Maybe what he means is that we have the means to not be in the flesh, to not be self-centered, but to be other-centered, to be Christ-centered. We have the knowledge and the opportunity. We have the gospel, he would argue. We have the Spirit; let it take over. Set your mind to the guidance of the Spirit.

I woke up this morning with my mind. That in itself is a needed thing these days: to have a mind; even better, to use it. Or as Paul would have it, to offer it, to be transformed by the renewing of the mind, to let the Spirit dwell in your mind. Or simply, wake up this morning with your mind stayed on Jesus. That's a start.

Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, served churches in Indiana, Arkansas, and the British Methodist Church. His PhD in preaching and media is from the University of Edinburgh. He has taught preaching in seminary and conference settings for more than twenty years.

//

Notice at collection

Your Privacy Choices

