

## **A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, August 2, 2009**

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From the epistle (Romans 8:12f.), “If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

On four of the last five Sundays, our epistle has come from Romans. Romans is especially significant in the western church because its teachings were a foundation for the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who found no peace in the religious practices that were generally understood to be the means of one's salvation. One tradition has it that while he was performing the religious act of crawling on his knees up the holy stairs in Rome, a passage from Romans came to his mind, “The just shall live by faith” (1:17, from Habakukk 2:4).

Justification by faith became the central doctrine of the Reformation. This doctrine teaches that we are accepted by God, not because we say our prayers, perform our religious duties and give money to charitable causes. Rather, we are accepted by God because we put our faith or trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The doctrine of justification by faith teaches us that there is nothing we can do to be accepted by God, except to believe in the One whom God has sent (cf John 6:29).

Given the central place of the doctrine of justification in the Reformation, it is interesting that none of the lessons from Romans that we have read for the last several weeks focus on it. The omission is due to the fact that most of our lessons come from a lectionary of Sunday readings that predates the Reformation.

Instead of justification, our lessons have focused on behavior. The question has been, “Since we are freely justified by faith, why does it matter how we behave? We can always come back and be forgiven again since, after all, we are justified by faith and not by what we do.”

St. Paul has been telling us that this way of thinking is wrong because it ignores the change that has taken place in us through baptism. In baptism, we died with Christ to our former way of life, and we rose with Christ to live in a new way. In our natural state, we were bound to obey the impulses of our fallen nature. But now, because we belong to Christ, we are bound to obey the Holy Spirit, whom God has given us.

Today's epistle introduces the spiritual concept of mortification. “If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.” To “mortify” means to “put to death.” It is the natural extension of our baptism. If we died with Christ in baptism, it follows that we will continually put to death all that is contrary to our profession.

Now, historically in the church, mortification has taken on some extreme forms. Whipping oneself (self-flagellation) and wearing a hair shirt were two ways that some sought to mortify the body. These extreme forms of mortification were among the things that Martin Luther reacted against.

When St. Paul tells us to mortify the flesh, he is not instructing us to inflict bodily harm on ourselves. Rather, he is telling us to turn away from evil in firm and forceful ways. The point is that

because we have the Holy Spirit, we are able to do what we were not able to do before we came to faith.

Unaided human nature is captive to sin. Try as we might, apart from Christ, we cannot perfectly fulfill the will of God. But through the Holy Spirit we are able to rise above the limitations of our fallen nature. We can do, by grace, what we could not do by nature.

Part of the freedom of a Christian is the possession of the power to act in new ways. Thus, when facing temptation, we have the power to say no, to walk away, to avert the eyes, to take the very thought captive and make it subject to Christ.

The gift of the Spirit gives us new power and freedom. However, as St. Paul talks about the need to continually put to death the deeds of the body, it is clear that a struggle is envisioned. We must learn to use our spiritual strength in battle against the enemies of the soul. Our freedom is hard won.

In the spiritual battle, there will be occasional failure. That is, we may face a temptation and fail to mortify the deeds of the body in a given situation. We may follow the thought rather than turn away from it. At points of failure, we must remember again that we are justified by faith and not by what we do.

This is, in part, what we remember when we come to the altar each week. As we come to Jesus in the sacrament with confession of sin and faith in him, we remember again that we are accepted because of God's grace and not because of what we do.

Being accepted by God as we are is the foundation for becoming the person God intends us to be. God's grace gives us the desire and ability to mortify the deeds of the body, to be better than we are, to become more and more like Christ.

As the epistle says, "Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father. The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit that we are children of God."