

ALL THAT FLESH
Copyright 2008: Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
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University Congregational Church

Reading: Ephesians 6: 10-12

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the ruling authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness.

The daughter of Caesar said to Rabbi Y'housu'a ben Hananya, "Why is glorious wisdom contained in such an ugly vessel like you?"

He replied to her, "Does your father keep his wine in earthen vessels?"

She replied, "In what else should he keep it?"

The Rabbi answered, "Why people as important as you should keep it in gold and silver decanters."

The girl immediately went and told her father, who put the wine into gold and silver vessels. In time the wine soured and Caesar demanded to know who had given his daughter such faulty advice. She reported, "It was none other than Rabbi Y'housu'a ben Hananya."

Caesar called the Rabbi to him and asked, "Why did you give such advice to my daughter?"

"What she told me," said the Rabbi, "I told her."

Caesar retorted, "Are there not also beautiful people who are scholars?"

“Yes,” replied the Rabbi, “but if they were ugly, they would be even greater scholars.”

It is hard for us to believe that our bodies and our souls are inseparable; that our material being is woven with the thread of bone and thought, sinew and imagination, blood and feelings, organ and will. Like Caesar’s daughter we assume that the sublime cannot be found amongst the common, but only in reserves beyond the ordinary. People searching for spiritual direction are often surprised to learn that spiritual maturity is not an escape from the daily tasks, disappointments, frustrations, minor victories and pain of family and work. It is like the young man who rushed to the Zen monastery. He approached the Abbot to beg instruction on the path of enlightenment. But the Master only answered, “You should go and eat some supper and then wash dishes.”

New church members are shocked, and even disappointed, when they find out that the preacher gets cranky sometimes; that the Board of Trustees has to spend much of its time doing mundane things like raise the budget; and that people in the congregation may gossip about one another mercilessly.

I am reminded of a novice who entered a Catholic monastery. It was a very strict order that did not allow talking. They could only speak the prayers and chants of the church. Once a year each novice was allowed to have an interview with the Abbot, but was only allowed to say two words.

The first year the novice reported to the Abbot and said, “Food bad.”

The second year he said to his leader, “Bed hard.”

The third year he stated, “Room cold.”

On his fourth year the novice announced, “I quit.”

“Well, I’m not surprised,” replied the Abbot. “The only thing you have done since you have been here is complain.”

Somewhere along the line we have gotten the notion that our earthly existence is alien to our spiritual development. Some even go to the extremes of asceticism to try and rid themselves of desire and temptation. They believe that redemption means to be saved from this life and all of its entanglements. I would like to suggest this morning that authentic religious experience takes place in the humble setting of the human condition.

But we must also understand that the human condition is nothing more than that. We are creatures of this earth. We are flesh, and in the ancient Jewish tradition flesh is not distinguished from soul. Flesh is the collective reference for all of human kind. Believe it or not, even in the writings of St. Paul, flesh is a neutral term. The Greek word is *sarx*, and nowhere do the Jews or Paul imply that human flesh is inherently evil, or that our feelings, sensual appetites, or physical desires should be avoided or even suppressed. Jewish theology places the human being before God as one who is flawed and whose understanding of the Creator is so defective and insufficient as to be laughable. That is not a judgment against human beings, but a statement of reality. As a creature of God the human being is

a creature of flesh, flawed, always subjected to death, Those are the very terms on which the Sacred is willing to deal with us.

The problem with all of that flesh is that we are tempted to define ourselves only by our physical existence. We think that we will find meaning only in the material. We deceive ourselves into thinking that purpose and value are derived from the transitory and perishable. But as the Buddhists point out, the transitory and the perishable are illusions. The beautiful young woman, fresh as the morning dew, will one day wither like dried grass and bend like a reed in the wind. The strong young man who races to victory on track and field will cross the finish line in old age, disease, and death. A Japanese fold saying asks:

The man I saw yesterday,
What's become of him?
Today: under the tomb.
Tomorrow someone'll ask about me,
What's become of him?

Flesh will run its course from birth to death. It is the vessel that carries us through this life. But flesh becomes dangerous when it becomes the ultimate norm by which we try to measure life. Our bodies, our homes, our possessions begin to define us. We assume that we can make our marks on life with the things we own or the power we wield. Sadly, we will even destroy our lives when we give ultimate value to all that is material.

St. Paul warned the Ephesians to understand that the real threat to human communities is found in the powers and principalities that exploit the human

condition. The problem for human communities is not the human body. The challenge is found in institutions and organizations that oppress human beings for economic, political, or social profit. Examples abound. Some Health Maintenance Organizations place profit above human medical needs. We have seen some third world countries exploited for their labor or their natural resources. Rather than enriching their lives and providing them with sustainable economies they are crushed under foreign economic blocs of power.

Perhaps you heard me tell the children the story of the monkey king who looked down the walls of a canyon and saw the bright moon reflected on the water. “Oh, what a beautiful jewel! I must have it,” he thought. When he told this to the other monkeys, they all said that it would be very hard to obtain. The monkey king declared, “I must have this brooch, it will be the crown jewel, and I will command the respect of other kings.”

The king’s chancellor said, “I have an idea. One monkey will hold on to a tree and everyone else will form a line, each one holding tightly to the tail of the monkey in front. Then we can lower our monkey chain down to the water and the last one will be able to reach the jewel.”

So, 500 monkeys dangled one by one down to the water. But the weight of all the monkeys was too much for the one holding on to the tree, and all 500 monkeys fell into the water and drowned. Monkeys are drowned everyday by

consumerism, materialism, the greed for power, lust, and self ambition. I am reminded of Thoreau's comment in *Walden*:

“Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life are not only indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor.”¹

I submit that there are higher values by which our lives can be measured and shaped; values that are genuine to human identity. They are values that transcend this aging, changing, and dying corpus. They are values not dependent on the stock market, the price of oil, the party in power, or the suasion of the dominant religion. I speak of those values that characterize our relationships with and in life.

In the Old Testament human beings are best understood in their relationship with God. Yahweh's breath flows into our very souls making us living creatures. Human identity is thus shaped by Sacred nature rather than human nature. We are who we are in relationship with the Creator Spirit of life. We stand before the Holy dressed in human flesh, and we cannot be divided into divine parts and earthly parts.

A fundamental value of the Sacred and human relationship is freedom. Flesh is always tempted to tyranny, be it sexual, chemical, political, economical, or social. But Sacred freedom calls us to bow down to no thing and no one upon this earth. We may choose freedom from the changing fads and passing fashions. The

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966), p. 9.

Hebrew God is identified as “the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” The message being that no one on the face of this planet is called to tyranny, oppression, or exploitation. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “You, my brothers, are called to be free.”

On a daily basis we are often held captive to old wounds, and we are called to the freedom of healing. Some of us are bondsmen to the past and we are called to the freedom of the present moment. There are many who are the slaves of guilt and we are called to the freedom of forgiveness. Who is not a vassal of fear; the fear of spiders or the fear of failure; the fear of rejection or the fear of death; the fear of loneliness or the fear of disease? I do not know a parent who does not have a fear. We are called to the freedom of courage.

Freedom is like the philosopher Diogenes, who was sitting on a curbstone eating bread and lentils for his supper. He was seen by the philosopher Aristippus, who lived comfortably by flattering the king.

Aristippus said to Diogenes, “If you would learn to be subservient to the king, you would not have to live on lentils.”

Diogenes replied, “Learn to live on lentils and you will not have to be subservient to the king.

St. Paul argues that those who live in the Spirit of freedom are characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. Those who are oppressed are those who are without compassion, who are

in despair, depressed, hostile, impatient, selfish, untrustworthy, rough, and licentious. Behind every oppression is a fear that needs to control and dominate. Blowing in the wind of freedom is the trust that life is a divine gift.

There was a child made entirely of salt. He very much wanted to know where he had come from. So he set out on a long journey and traveled to many lands in pursuit of this understanding. Finally he came to the shore of the great ocean. “How marvelous,” he cried, and stuck one foot in the water. The ocean beckoned him further saying, “If you wish to know who you are, do not be afraid.” The salt child walked further and further into the water, dissolving with each step. At the end he exclaimed, “Ah, now I know who I am.” Can anyone in this room imagine such a radical freedom?

The Spirit of freedom is letting go of all of our assumptions and pretensions and allowing ourselves to be absorbed into life - all of life. To be free is to melt into life and to serve her wherever we meet her. What is the human experience but to celebrate and serve in total abandonment of all our fears and prejudices? What is the religious experiences but to celebrate and serve? I am reminded of the old Jewish woman who was dying of rectal cancer. Her husband sat at her bedside, holding her hand, talking with her, crying and reminiscing together. A nurse came into the room. “Excuse me, sir,” she said, gently touching his shoulder. “It time to change her dressings. If you’d leave the room, I’ll be done in just a few minutes.”

“Excuse me,” the man replied with gentle but determined smile, “but I’ll stay right here. This tush and I have had a lot of good times together. I’m not going to turn my back on her now.”²

And we are back to the Hebrew understanding that we are defined by the quality of our relationships with the God who is with us. The elder Jewish husband understood that true freedom is being present with those whom we love, even as they lay dying. In his book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that “Whenever we see someone who is loving, compassionate, mindful, caring, and understanding, we know that the Holy Spirit is there.”

There was a boy with a rare disease who had to live his entire life in a sterile plastic bubble. He had an extreme immune deficiency disease. A single germ or an unsterilized touch could be fatal. Anyone reaching to him through the hermetically sealed opening in the bubble had to wear sterilized gloves. Everything that came to him such as books, food, utensils, and gifts had to be decontaminated before it passed through the opening. He was sealed off, isolated, and in permanent quarantine. Talk about a prisoner.

But even the airtight, sterile bubble could not save him. When the boy understood that he was dying he asked for only one thing. He wanted to step outside the bubble and be held in the arms of his father. We wanted to be caressed and kissed by his mother. The humidifiers, oxygen pumps, sterilizers, and climate

² Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Kethcam, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 242.

control systems were shut down. The bubble opened and the boy stepped into the freedom of his mother and father's touch. He died in their arms at peace. I think that in that moment he found true freedom. And I think in that moment his mother and father finally found their own freedom.

There are too many people who live in bubbles of oppression. They live in artificial climates of fear. Too many people are dying without ever knowing the touch of grace. We will all know that the Holy Spirit of God is among us when we burst the bubbles with compassion, gentleness, healing, and kindness. You see, God does not will for us freedom from the flesh, but freedom in the flesh.

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