

2nd Sunday after Epiphany, January 14, 2017

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christmas season that we just finished nine days ago is all about the incarnation, the Word of God becoming “flesh,” God’s Son becoming human in Jesus Christ. I mentioned last week that the Gospel according to Mark that we’ll be making our way through this year doesn’t have a Christmas story. The closest we get is Jesus’ baptism, the text we had last week, when the voice of God from heaven declares Jesus to be God’s beloved Son. But even without a Christmas story, the incarnation is still there in Mark below the surface.

The incarnation is about God really with us, and this is not just as a spiritual presence, but a physical one. The normal pattern for how God interacts with people throughout the Old Testament is through speech. God verbally connects with his prophets and others, who then in turn relay God’s messages to God’s people. This general pattern is broken by only a few exceptions to the rule, like the three strangers who visit Abraham and Sarah, or God wrestling with Jacob, or maybe also God passing by Moses and allowing Moses to see God’s back.

God’s interaction with Samuel in our first reading follows this “before” pattern. There’s this boy, lying down in the temple, and a voice calls him. But he doesn’t see the one who is speaking. There’s a voice, but nobody is there. Or at least nobody with a body. Then comes Jesus, God in a body, God with us as one of us. And that completely changes our relationship with God. Unfortunately, many Christians throughout the ages right up until our own time haven’t appreciated what this really means. We have tended to separate the body and the spirit, and to think that our spirit is what connects us with God, and that some day our souls will fly away to heaven and leave our bodies behind. We might be able to think that way if Christmas never happened. But it did. So now what?

That’s what the church at Corinth was dealing with in our second reading today. Corinth was a large, cosmopolitan Roman city. Paul founded a church there, and in his preaching he had emphasized how Jesus’ death and resurrection frees us from the law. The Corinthians believers took that to heart. But some of them, it seems, understood that to mean “anything goes.” “No rules. No laws. I can do whatever I want!” But that’s not at all what Paul meant, and that’s why he writes to them. If the Corinthians focused on individual freedom as though it were the core of the gospel, they miss the point of what God is up to in Jesus, and threaten to destroy the community of the church, the body of Christ.

Well, guess what? We are the modern Corinthians. We LOVE our freedom. Just read a few bumper stickers. And just like them our love of individual freedom can lead us to miss what God is doing in the world. Like them we too have to ask ourselves, “what kind of freedom are we talking about,” “what should my daily life look like in light of the freedom my faith gives me,” and “what is the effect of my freedom on the people around me?”

The particular example in front of us this morning is sex. That’s one of those things you don’t usually talk about in polite company. But give the recent revelations of pervasive sexual abuse and harassment in Hollywood and among our political leaders, not to mention the local police blotter, this is something I think we should be talking more about. I’m not going to be laying out specific rules and regulations for the people of Grace Lutheran Church today. But I also don’t want to pass by these words of Paul without comment. What I want to try to get at is the principle that underlies these rules and how that principle is helpful for us.

First we need to understand what Paul means by “fornication,” because if you’re like me it’s not a word you normally use. Greek-speaking Jews and then Christians used this word to talk about forbidden sexual relations. There’s a whole list in the book of Leviticus of what was forbidden for the

people of Israel in case you're interested. As an Israelite himself, Paul was brought up to follow that moral code. It's ingrained in his worldview. But he's made a big deal about how Christ has freed us from the Law, so he can't just say to the Corinthians, "You have to behave in a certain way because God said so. End of discussion." He will have to make his case in another way.

The second thing to understand here is that prostitution was a common and accepted practice in the Greco-Roman world. A respectable married man could avail himself of the services of a prostitute without shame. Of course there was a huge double standard, because while it wasn't shameful for a man to see a prostitute, it was inherently shameful for a woman to be a prostitute, never mind that most prostitutes were slaves who were forced into prostitution against their wills. This was a constant reality of life in the ancient world. And not just in the ancient world. It's something that continues right up to the present time, all over the world and even in our own country. Google Super Bowl Sunday and human trafficking if you're not already aware of the connection. While prostitution was socially acceptable for Greeks and Romans, it was never acceptable for Jews or Christians. But again, Paul will have to appeal to something other than the Law.

And that is what he's doing in this passage. Let me lay out the line of thinking that brings him to this point. God created our physical bodies in the first place and declared the physical creation – including our bodies – to be good. Then sin entered the world and creation was corrupted. In our sinfulness we used the good creation for our own selfish agendas. Now God, in God's mission to fix what has been broken, takes on a physical body in Jesus, reemphasizing and reinforcing the goodness of our physical bodies. By definition, the place where God dwells is holy, so in taking human form God makes our physical bodies holy. Paul even calls them here in this passage the "temple of the Holy Spirit."

The upshot of all of this is that our bodies and what we do with them matters. Paul argues that when we have sex with someone we join our lives to theirs. And as he develops this thought into the next chapter he says that those who "become one flesh" have a claim on one another and a mutual authority over one another. A clear implication of this understanding is that we cannot then treat other human beings as disposable objects that we use and discard. Or, to put it less legalistically, if we understand our bodies, and the bodies of others, to be holy ground, why would we ever want to treat our bodies, or the bodies of others, so casually?

This applies to sex, but it really has implications for all aspects of our physical lives, and for understanding who is in charge. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ free us from our captivity to sin, death, and the power of evil. The irony is that if we exercise our freedom by doing whatever we want, then we simply slide back into captivity and become slaves of our own desires and appetites. Because as Paul knows, we in our sinful condition are not really in control of what we want. Just this week I read an account of a heroin addict who was rescued by paramedics from an overdose, but as soon as the paramedics left he moved down the street and shot up again. Ask an addict about what it's like to do whatever you want. The only thing he wanted was the thing that was going to kill him.

The incarnation, then, could be seen as God's intervention in our lives. Baptized into his death and resurrection we are incorporated into Christ's own incarnate body. Fed with his body and blood in Holy Communion and empowered by the Holy Spirit through the promises of the God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ, we are re-formed in the image of God and our wills aligned with his, so that what we want, what we do, and how we live in all areas of our lives, reflect God's good intentions for us and the world that God is still in the process of rescuing.

If all of this is true, then we are in a better place to answer the question I asked earlier. "What should my daily life look like in light of the freedom my faith gives me?" May the good news our Lord Jesus Christ continue to strengthen our faith by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within and among us, and shape our lives in his grace. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.