

RETOOLING THE MIND – LIVING AS SONS

13For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ["Abba,] Father." 16The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

There is a lot of good evidence to suggest that the way a person carries himself – that is, whether he approaches life as an optimist, with confidence, with joy – or whether he approaches life as a pessimist, with fear, with angst – has a lot to do with the messages he is given, from a very young age, by his family. Kids who grow up being constantly corrected, constantly put down, constantly made fun of, often grow up believing that they have no value and approach life with the mindset that no one has any interest in what they have to say. And so, their heads are down, their steps are guarded, their minds are trained to believe that they are best when they are passive, when they do what they're told, live according to someone else's designs, and don't say too much.

In contrast, those who get the message, early on, that they matter – that their ideas are valuable, that their actions are helpful, -- who are encouraged to take chances, praised for their attempts to make a difference, and thanked for their contributions to the family grow up with the idea that they can be, in their own world at least, a mover and a shaker – that they can live life with confidence and poise because they are gifted and blessed.

I want to share with you that I, personally, grew up in a home that was a bit more the former than the latter. That is, there were many negative messages from both parents and older siblings that subtly or not so subtly suggested to me that others had greater value than me – that I was best when I was doing what others told me and that my ideas, while valuable, were usually superseded by those who were older, smarter, or more “in the know” than me. I don't think this was anyone's goal, intent, or design. I don't think that there was some evil plot to keep me in check or to undermine my skills. I just think that that's the way my family operated – whether it's because I was the youngest, or whether it's because there was already baggage from previous generations or whether it was maybe even just my own misinterpretation of the facts, that's the way it seemed.

For years I carried my head down and stayed silent. I was shy and introverted—hesitant and uncertain. And then something happened that transformed my life. Due to a changing dynamic in our family church, we moved to a new congregation. The two youngest of us, still teenagers, were encouraged to become involved in the youth group. And I want to tell you that there I encountered some wonderful leaders who made it their business to encourage kids, to celebrate their abilities and accomplishments, to listen to what they had to say.

I remember plainly and specifically one day when I had volunteered to be part of an Advent chancel drama. I was the reader, and I read into the microphone in my traditional way, with my heart beating fast, with my mind telling me I would screw up, my head down, my eyes glued to the text. And our youth group leader, Mrs. Dufendach, came over, put her arm around my shoulders and said, “Phil, why are you so afraid. You are one of the best readers in this group, and, more importantly, you are a child of God. He’s right here next to you. You’re going to do a fantastic job, so lift up your head and speak into that microphone like it’s already finished and you did it perfectly – cause God was right there to help you.”

Wow! So different than “speak up, we can’t hear you.” Or giggles and laughter. Or finding someone else. This woman chose to see in me something different than I saw in myself. This woman didn’t just say “I had potential,” she said, “you’re a child of God.” And, in time, what she saw became more and more real to me and to the world.

Today, in truth, by nature, I am still that hesitant guy – and still carry around some of the baggage that was a part of my childhood. The negative messages, without a doubt, flow more easily than the positive ones. I’m not sure you ever really get rid of that completely.

Nevertheless, there is another voice that cries out again and again and again to balance out that anxious, nervous, fear-filled teenager. He is the Holy Spirit who declares me to be a child of God, a man blessed by God with various talents and gifts, and who, in Christ, has value. I am keenly aware that I am not perfect. I know well, maybe better than most, my struggles and failure and faults. But I also know that I am connected to One who loved me enough to give everything for me, and who calls me out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

This is the message St. Paul wants to convey to the Roman Christians and to you and me in our text for today: the value that we have as Children of God, the giftedness that He has

placed in us as servants of Christ, our potential to impact the world and make a difference because of who we are.

Now don't get me wrong, Paul also knows our history: that we are sinners who deserve God's wrath, God's punishment, God scolding, God's condemnation. He knows that every day, in some way, we are going to pull out that old person and live not as victorious children of God but according to the flesh – yielding to its passions and pleasures, falling prey to its deceptions and dreams, and getting ourselves caught up in the thoughts, actions, words and deeds of darkness.

He knows it. He knows it very well. In fact, in Romans 7, which we read a few weeks ago, he talks about his own struggle when he says,

¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ...
¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. ... ²¹So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²²For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

But St. Paul also knows that our sinful nature is not King any more. Jesus came to liberate us from slavery to that old person, and when He died on the cross to pay the penalty, He removed those chains from us. So now, there is no reason to walk with our heads down, our steps guarded, our minds trained to believe that we are helpless, poor, miserable sinners. No. That's why St. Paul declares:

you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ

So, those voices that ring in your ears and tell you, as they told me, that you have no reason for joy, no reason for confidence, no reason to lift up your head and use the formidable talents and gifts that God's given you to His glory -- tell them to be quiet – in fact, more than that, take them over to that baptismal font, and hold them under the water until they stop wriggling. And say to yourself, “NO, I will not listen to that nonsense any more. I am a child of God. Jesus paid the price for my sins and has released me from the law of sin and death.

Listen to St. Paul as he does it in Galatians chapter 2: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

And you know what? Not only can you walk with your head high and your heart ablaze, but you can also do what Mrs. Dufendach did for me. You can be a tool of God’s Spirit to lift up other spirits. Look around you at your brothers and sisters here, for instance. How many of them are just yearning to hear a word of encouragement, a word of thanks, a word of hope, of love, of praise, of prayer.

And go out there and the number grows exponentially. Because, out there, so many are still trapped and do not know the freedom that comes with the love of Jesus.

Can I make a request of you? Don’t leave this building today – don’t step one foot out into that parking lot, without taking a moment to share a word of uplift with someone else here today. Cause that’s a part of why we’re here. As the writer of Hebrews says, “Let us consider how we may spur one another in love and good deeds.”

I’m so glad that God used Mrs. Dufendach to help me see Jesus. May God also use you to impact the joy of your brothers and sisters here. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.