

Sermon for October 8, 2017 (Proper 22 REV, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Romans 8:1-11; Psalm 19; Matthew 21:33-46

Title: To Set The Mind on the Spirit

“The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2).

My dear sisters and brothers in the Lord: do you wish to be free from the law of sin and death?

Are you tired of hearing about death nearly every single day? Tired of hearing about people who are shot and killed, villages that are burned, addicts who overdose, cities that are bombed, missiles that are tested, wars that are threatened?

Does all of this feel like a weight of pain and suffering and darkness that overwhelms and suffocates?

What’s the solution to this crazyness?

How do we find a way forward into a brighter future?

With all my heart, and all my mind, I am convinced that the solution to our human dilemma is found in this vision of new life in Christ as explained by Paul.

Remember that the apostle Paul used the first 3 chapters of this letter to build his case that all people are in the same predicament: Jews and Greeks, circumcised and uncircumcised, civilized and barbarian. All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory – short of the fullness of life that God has intended.

Paul then explained how the story of Abraham shows a way forward for all people through faith, not through obeying the law, the demands of Torah.

In the preceding chapter, chapter 7, Paul shared the struggle that all people experience within ourselves between good and evil. You can feel his pathos when he says:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24).

And, of course, he answers his own question in our reading today when he begins with this powerful affirmation:

“There is, therefore, NOW no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Right now, today, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is amazing good news that we need to embrace and take to heart.

In Christ, in the Body of Christ, we are free from condemnation!

We are protected, shielded, our debt is paid, our slate is wiped clean.

We are free to begin again, to launch out on a brand new life.

But this is not the end of the story, is it?

I mean, we can rightly celebrate this good news, while all around us are signs of condemnation and judgment and suffering and death.

Too much suffering. Too much death.

How does Paul explain this?

“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6).

As we all know far too well, there are many whose minds are set on the flesh.

I want you to know that there is a lot of pressure on me today to speak about gun violence and gun control.

On Thursday, I attended a clergy gathering with Bishop Steve at the Cathedral in Portland. We have a few of these gatherings each year which offer a time for conversation and dialogue about what we see happening in our congregations and in our broader society.

Thursday morning, the Bishop asked the group of about 60 of us this question: “This coming Sunday, how are you going to address the mass shooting in Las Vegas? What are you going to do differently?”

A lengthy conversation ensued, with many impassioned voices crying out for change. It seems that many parishes are organizing to demand gun control legislation.

In place of the Prayers of the People this week, many will use a Litany for Gun Violence Prevention that was drafted by our Bishop.

A number of parishes will provide handouts that explain how to contact our members of Congress in support of gun control legislation.

BUT, I want you to know that you will not hear any of that from Saint Mary's while I have been called to exercise spiritual oversight of this community.

Now, please, hear me clearly: I too mourn the loss of life. I too long for an end to gun violence. I too want to see change in our society, and in our world. And I believe that there are some simple, common sense things that we can do to improve public safety. We should all pursue these.

So why not organize and advocate for gun control legislation?
Because this is simply treating the symptoms of a crippling disease.

Gun violence is a symptom of a horrible sickness. War is another symptom of this sickness. Heroin addiction is a symptom of this disease. Nuclear weapons are a visible symbol of this sickness.

There are many good efforts being done by many people to deal with these symptoms, and I encourage all of you to be engaged in these efforts in whatever way your conscience calls you.

But the Church, the Body of Christ, has a deeper calling, a more radical purpose. We are here to get to the root of the problem. We are here to pursue a more complete and fundamental cure to the real disease.

And what is the solution? The apostle has explained it:
"God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the

flesh so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3-4).

Now, this is very dense, so bear with me and let’s unpack it.

First of all, notice the agent at work: GOD has done what the law could not do. GOD is the one who has acted to do what human effort has been unable to do.

God sent the Son to be like us – and for what purpose? To do what?

TO DEAL WITH SIN.

You see, Paul envisions sin as a power that has control over human society. It is a power which corrupts and perverts and kills and destroys. Sin is a power that is against life.

But God’s goal is for the full flowering of life in all of its forms, with a wise and loving and compassionate human society caring for and nurturing the life of this planet.

But that cannot happen as long as sin remains in control. And Paul argues that we are unable to deal with sin on our own.

We cannot do it. We need help.

You see, to take away guns, to keep people from gaining access to dangerous weapons may temporarily prevent harm, but it will do nothing in the long run if there remains anger, bitterness, greed, malice, hatred on the inside.

THAT’s what needs to change. The human heart needs to change, for this is where the true sickness is found.

God has begun this work, but we must cooperate with it. As Paul said: “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6).

God has set us free from the power of sin and death, but we must carry it forward.

We must set our mind on the Spirit, not on ego or self-interest, not on getting ahead and getting more.

After all, this is the goal envisioned by the parable in Matthew's Gospel. It is a difficult parable to hear – AND to interpret. But at the most basic level, the point is quite clear: God desires to see a people, a community, that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

And what are those fruits? They are actions. Not emotions. Not words. Not feelings. But actions which our Creator longs to see.

Do you know a good place where we might see these actions clearly listed?

Right in the Prayer of Saint Francis. You can find it on page 833 in the Book of Common Prayer. Please, look it up. On page 833.

Will you join me in praying this together – in unison?

***Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.***

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. YOUR peace. Not a peace that we must create, that we must manufacture, that we must legislate.

It is GOD's peace which passes human understanding.

So, my friends, will you offer yourself today, and each day, as an instrument, a tool, a channel of God's peace?

Will you set your mind of the Spirit and serve as an agent of life and peace?

May it always be so among us. Amen.