

July 16, 2017
Romans 8:1-11; Psalm 119:105-112

As you may remember, Paul has been writing the Roman Christians about the wrestling match between our bodies and our spirits, God's law and sin. Over and over again, he pointed to God's grace being bigger and better than any of life's challenges. He has been clear that grace doesn't save us from the *experience* of the struggle. While God loves us, and we may love God, we continue to struggle with the daily grind of sin and death and earthly troubles. God's grace is with us; grace saves us from anything other than God's intended outcome. Today we will begin Chapter 8, which continues the same point. Some call this "the greatest chapter in scripture." It is bookended by the most grace-filled words we could hear: "there is no condemnation... nothing can separate us from God's love." Listen again for the Word of God to the people of God:

READ Romans 7:24-8:11

The judgement occurred. The criminal is guilty. But there is no sentence. No condemnation.

Let us be clear that while God is our Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer, while God loves us more than we can fathom, God is still our Judge. And in this role, God knows that we are guilty of sin and treason in God's kingdom. There are many reasons that we deserve condemnation, some of which are used in each Sunday's Prayer of Confession: we do not do what we *should*, and often do what we *should not*; we do *too much* of some things, and do *too little* of others. We act and think in ways that do not please God.

Christian or not, most of us suffer from #FirstWorldProblems. We have grown accustomed to certain privileges given us simply by where we live. Although we may recognize that those privileges are not extended to people in other countries, we get annoyed when those

privileges are unavailable to us. Within social media platforms, people talk about these #FirstWorldProblems. It is a fascinating conversation thread. Somewhat confessional, somewhat indignant. The authors clearly understand that their “problems” are not real problems. In posting something as a #FirstWorldProblem, they claim their guilt as much as they share trivial frustrations, and clamor for more of a particular privilege. As I read through #FirstWorldProblems last week, I found statements like: “having slow wifi is the worst thing in the world. #FirstWorldProblems.” and “my shampoo and conditioner never empty at the same time. #FirstWorldProblems” and “Staring at 6 possible outfits today and sad that I have nothing to wear. #FirstWorldProblems.” We all have #FirstWorldProblems to add to this list. Mine would include the expectation of indoor plumbing and hot water. Adam and I stayed in a friend’s cabin during our honeymoon. The water and the romance went out the second night. I was mortified that he would soon discover my sweat and grime and stink. I was in a true panic. Adam took it in stride, though. He reminded me that a day without hot water, or a day without a shower is more normal than not. It’s a #FirstWorldProblem, and a sign that I have “set my mind on things of the flesh.” Guilty as charged.

This online conversation is a pull between opposing pieces of our national conscious. We want to portray ourselves in flattering ways. Statistically, people think that they are better – more attractive, smarter, better drivers, just better – than we actually are. And naturally, we like to show others the better pieces of ourselves. But as we display these pieces of our identity – certainly matters of the flesh – we raise ourselves above others. We want to condemn others for being less than who we are, or who we think they should be. We *want* to judge. We want to condemn people for what they have done, and predict where they will continue to go awry. Bad driver? “Guilty,” we say, with some amount of satisfaction. Liar? “Guilty!” Wasteful spender?

Guilty! Someone who hurts other people? Guilty! Let us remove them and their wrongdoings so that the rest of us won't be harmed by (or even tempted by) their wrongdoing.

And yet, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God. God knows who we are. God knows our weakness – in body, mind, and soul. But God chooses not to condemn us. When human justice would seek revenge or punishment, God offers mercy and grace.

Christians are called to a better way of life with outrageously high standards. We, of course, fail to live up to them, leaving us vulnerable for the charge of hypocrisy. Yet we must remind ourselves that church membership comprised entirely of sinners and failures. Only hypocrites sit in these pews. None of us get it right. All of us walk the tightrope between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. All of us deserve condemnation. All of us need grace.

Claiming the questionable and hypocritical behavior of Christians, Augustine of Hippo wrote “The church is a whore, but she is my mother.” We do not live by the Spirit simply by association. We are earthy, fleshy folk, constantly striving to be as good as God intends. If we were honest, we would always claim our guilt, and never profess our innocence. Doing so, is, of course, easier some days than others. Some days it hurts to admit our fleshy ties to life. Some days we pretend to be greater than we are. Some days we think we can go without grace. Some days we refuse the mercy of the Spirit.

The current political climate in the United States unfortunately encourages such self-sufficient behavior. Divisions between parties and within parties have everyone pointing fingers, condemning others with shouts of, “Guilty!” and pretending that we ourselves are innocent of wrong-doing. We are quick to set ourselves apart from those with opposing views, as if we are better than or different from them. Yet, in speaking poorly of others, in advocating for policies

that hurt others, we live by the flesh and not the Spirit. Brett Younger, the pastor at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn wrote this week,

You cannot follow Jesus and support a tax cut for the rich that would end health care to millions of the oldest, poorest and sickest people. You cannot follow Jesus and hate minorities. You cannot follow Jesus and treat women as inferior. When faced with the choice of following Christ by caring for the hungry or supporting a politician who promises to make the rich richer, [some Christians] ignore the faith they profess... [Regardless of your Christian beliefs], If you are acting like a racist, homophobe or misogynist in 2017, then you are a racist, homophobe or misogynist.

Harsh words. Condemning. And yet, also confessional. Through the article, Younger explained that this is his former congregation. This is who he was. He confessed that he was part of this body of Christians. He confessed complacency. He confessed his role in such hypocritical behavior. He deserved condemnation. He needed grace. And on his better days, works against the impulse to condemn others, and instead tries to share God's grace.

Our community at Sweet Hollow is not perfect. We are not flawless people. We are sinful people. We are broken people. We hurt one another. We hurt ourselves, and we hurt God. We deserve condemnation. We need grace.

One of the best parts of our theologically reformed liturgy is that each week we take time to admit our reality to God and one another. We walk through these doors with all of our sin on our shoulders. Guilty. And soon after worship begins, we confess our sins. It may be the most honest moment of our week. It is a relief to finally admit our hypocritical reality! It is a relief to stop hiding what we've done. No more secrets. No more shame. Confessing our sins is also a joy – because we remember that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We approach our Almighty Judge with humility, grateful that grace has already been extended to us.

As we leave the throne of judgement, we take hope with us – for ourselves and for the world around us. Because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

We must pray that God is at the front of our thoughts, day and night. That God's grace is what we see and seek in others. That God's love is what we do and receive from others. "Thou my best thought by day and by night... Be Thou My Vision."