

“All Off!

“Roman Holiday” Series

Romans 8:1-6; Romans 8:7-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might rejoice in your love
for our whole selves. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Welcome to Week 3! We are spending the month of July exploring a few chapters of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, looking for what we can find there that speaks of grace and liberation. Since we’re looking for signs of the gospel that refresh and restore like a good vacation, and we’re doing it in the book of Romans, the series is called “Roman Holiday,” which means I’m also getting some opportunities to talk about one of my favorite movies. Romans is Paul’s longest and densest letter, which means it has been used by theologians throughout the centuries to develop “systematic” theologies, sometimes in ways that may no longer be helpful (if they ever were). So we’re trying to use fresh eyes, asking questions and assuming that Paul was a human being before he was anything else.

Now that we’ve waded into chapter 8, we can no longer avoid wrestling with what scholars often call “binaries.” A “binary” may sound complicated, but it’s really nothing more than two things held in stark contrast. We use binaries all the time. Day and night. Black and white. Women and men. Us and them. Good and bad. People like binaries because they’re clear; something is either this or that. It seems a major thread in Western civilization has been the effort to categorize our world, and binaries have been a

large part of that. Some cultures have enshrined binaries to the degree that they're not just used for describing things, but are, in fact, enforced, usually subtly but sometimes violently. And church tradition, in particular, has used binaries for centuries, in ways that have done tremendous damage. If the church has seemed more obsessed with sex and sexuality than it has with serving the poor – despite the clear witness of scripture to a reversed version of those priorities – it's because this binary between flesh and spirit was so heartily embraced and enforced for so long.

But what we've discovered, more and more, over the past 50 years, – and what some cultures have always known – is that binaries are not particularly good descriptions of reality. Reality is not either/or. Yes, day and night are two different things. But sunrise and sunset are also part of our world. Black and white are colors, but there are so many shades of gray and brown, not to mention thousands of other colors. Categories can be useful, but trying to force reality into them can end up distorting our lived experience and lead us astray from the search for truth.

So when we're in danger of getting lost in the weeds here in the first half of Romans 8, with Paul obsessively contrasting the “flesh” with the “Spirit, we need to apply a different lens. We need to consider what is useful here, and what has been calcified into unhelpful binaries that have caused damage. There is no denying that there are thousands of years of church history that denigrated our human bodies and their needs and wants, partially because of the way Paul talks about the “flesh” here in

Romans. But rather than just throwing it all out, let's hold it a little more gently and see what might still offer us grace.

One of the most useful things I ever learned in seminary was in my Constructive Theology class with Dr. Don Compier. He was talking about how we should assess these body versus spirit binaries that show up in many places in scripture. And he reminded us that all of the people writing these passages lived before aspirin. They lived before toothbrushes. They lived before almost all the basic technologies we take for granted that allow us to live in our bodies with less pain and suffering than we would have had 2000 years ago or even 300 years ago. Imagine living most of your life with a raging toothache. No wonder American colonists drank hard cider for breakfast. Think of having nothing with which to treat a migraine or a sore back. No air conditioning, no water without someone having to haul it from somewhere. It begins to seem safe to assume that these folks did have a different experience of living in human bodies than we do. So we can give them that, but let's stop assuming their assessments of bodies automatically speak to our lives now.

When Paul speaks of the "flesh," he may be trying to draw a hard contrast. But we know he was still living in a body, and it wasn't a dead body, no matter what verse 10 says. Paul simply wasn't as good at subtle metaphors as Jesus was, and so his writings got turned into rigid doctrines that led away from abundant life. If you strip away the most rigid approaches to these verses, you can see that Paul was still struggling with how to talk about sin. He clearly understood and experienced that sin, the desire or

motivation to do unrighteous things, was still active. He was trying to find a place to put it, so that he could warn us away, and the “flesh” is what he landed upon.

There is, however, a major theological argument against this condemnation of bodies, namely, the Incarnation, and its grounding in the Creation story. If we believe that God created the world and everything in it, and pronounced it Good— If we believe that the Word became flesh and lived among us – and I for one, believe both of those things before I even glance at what Paul has to say – then we simply cannot accept a doctrine that tells us our bodies are bad. It does not make sense. Why would a God who didn’t care about the physical realities of our lives have bothered making a world in the first place? Why bother visiting with us, living among us, offering divine solidarity with our fully human lives, if our physical existence is the site and source of sin? When we ground our approach to Romans in these convictions, the struggle that Paul is describing looks less like a binary that must be forced upon us, and more like an attempt to explain something that cannot be fully explained with words.

And then, of course, there is the truth that we know in our own hearts from our own experience of living as humans. We may talk about our body and our mind and our spirit as if they are separate things, but we know that they are, in fact, inseparable. There is no way to draw lines between them. Though the words have distinct meanings, they are all intertwined and integral to making us who we are. Our minds and our spirits affect our bodies, and our experience within our physical bodies has a huge impact on our minds and spirits. Let’s feel this for a moment, if you’re willing.

If you will, I invite you to sit up very straight and tall in your chair for a moment or stand if you like. Stretch your arms up and out. What feelings does this posture evoke? (Strong, powerful, triumphant?) Okay, now, hunch over and pull your arms in toward your body. What does that feel like? (Scared, protective, etc.?)

Now let's try it the other way. Show me how you would express welcome with your body. (Describe postures.) How about fear? Joy?

We are one whole self, with a body and a mind and a spirit. They are not three beings, only sometimes in communication. They are just ways of describing aspects of our experience of living as ourselves. Despite centuries of promoting this false binary between the flesh and the spirit, Christian tradition has also testified to the connection between them. Why else would we engage in the ritual of baptism, something we do to our bodies to signify a change within our spirits? Why else would fasting be such a long-standing prayer practice?

It is not just Christian tradition that recognizes this connection. You knew a movie moment was coming, right? Last week, you heard me describe the basic premise of "Roman Holiday" as an escaped princess spending a day living like an ordinary person. (Well, except for the being on holiday part!) Princess Anne begins the movie with lovely, long brown hair. But one of the first things she does after waking up the next morning after her escape and getting back into the streets of Rome, is to linger outside a hair salon. And within minutes, she is inside telling the hair dresser to cut her hair "all off!" He is, understandably, reluctant to make such a dramatic change. But the

princess – who is, no doubt, unaccustomed to having her orders questioned – is quite insistent. “All off!” she repeats, and he proceeds to mutter those words as he chops and chops. When he’s done, they are both taken aback for a moment, but then he sees how it can work, makes a few small adjustments, and the scene ends in smiles all around. At the end of the movie, Princess Anne will return to her royal life, but she will never be quite the same person again, and one doubts that she’ll grow her hair out again.

Sometimes the changes we need to make in our lives are so important that we need to mark them in our bodies, whether with new hair or tattoos or just a new wardrobe. Sometimes the things that change who we are are, in fact, changes that happen to our bodies, whether it’s having children or a cancer diagnosis or losing mobility. Our bodies matter. Not more than our spirits, but not less. They are good, not better than our spirits, but not worse. They can bring us struggle, just as our spirits can. It’s all us. And “us” is what God loves.

Our passage today concludes with Paul’s assurance that the Spirit is what provides our adoption papers. It is the Spirit that allows us to recognize God as Father, as Beloved Creator, as the One who calls us home. Whoever heard of a Divine Parent that did not cherish the bodies of their children? That is not the God that we worship! That is why we bring our whole selves to worship – body, mind, and spirit. All of us is holy. All of us is in need of continual redemption – healing, life, peace, strength. All of us is who God loves. Hallelujah and Amen!