

WGUMC May 27, 2018 “The Undivided Life”
Romans 8:5-6; 14-17

This last week has been a good one for mainline Christianity. We are usually ignored by the media, but one of our own made a big splash at the royal wedding. Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, preached a sermon the likes of which few Brits had ever heard. Then on Thursday, he joined other prominent progressive clergy at a prayer service and vigil that ended with a silent march to the White House.

Earlier in the day, they issued a statement entitled: “Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis.” It harkens back to the Barmen Declaration that was written by some German clergy in 1934. They were concerned about the direction their country was taking, afraid that by following Hitler, German Christians were committing idolatry. The Barmen Declaration did not mention Hitler by name. It only mentioned Jesus, the one and only *Führer* (leader) for anyone who bears the name of Christ.

Today Christians around the world, especially in the West, are facing a new crisis in our public life, and it is high time to reclaim Jesus and his teaching about loving God and neighbor. There is a need again to confess our faith and speak out against idolatry. Much of what passes for Christianity in the media today is heresy. Too many Christians are living by the values of this world instead of the values of God's world. In the words of Paul, too many of us are living lives according to the flesh rather than according to the Spirit.

So I made some copies of this "Reclaiming Jesus" statement for you, but this isn't going to be a sermon about the crisis in our public life. This is going to be a sermon about the crisis in our personal lives. Believe me, they are not unrelated. To my social activist friends, I have to say that there can be no addressing the broader social and political problems in the world today without addressing the spiritual and personal problem in our hearts today.

The fundamental problem we have is outlined in Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 8. It's a long and somewhat convoluted

chapter, but what Paul is doing here is drawing a contrast between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. But those terms don't translate very well. When Paul is talking about life in the flesh, he is not talking about the sins of the flesh, which is where our mind goes. No, he is talking about life in this world, as opposed to life in the kingdom of God. In other words, he's talking about having a life full of sin, injustice, pain and sorrow when we could have a life full of "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." [Romans 14:17]

Paul tells the Christians in Rome, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." [8:9] Good for them, but is that true for us? Many of us are longing for life in the Spirit, but we are stuck in the life of the flesh. We are yearning to live in God's world, but we keep getting sucked back into the business of trying to survive in this world.

Parker Palmer calls what we are doing "living the divided life." And if that's something you struggle with, I highly recommend his book, called *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided*

Life.” I want to share some insights from that book with you today, because Parker has a different way of naming the contrast between flesh and spirit, one that may resonate more with us these days. With Richard Rohr, instead of flesh and spirit, he talks about false self and true self. Different terms, same truth.

Now Parker says that we didn’t start out with a divided life. When we were infants we were in touch with our true self. Then, as we grew and became more aware of the wider world, we learned to commute between the world out there and our inner truth in here. Whenever the scary world pressed in on us, we retreated to our bedrooms, our books, our imaginations and that’s how we kept in touch with who we really are.

But then we got older, and we lost the ability to go to our rooms and shut the door and converse with our soul. The world is too much with us, as Wordsworth put it. And it works hard to squelch the imagination we need for our inner journey. Why is this inner journey so hard to take? Why is life in the Spirit so hard to

live? Parker says, “Because imagining other possibilities for our lives would remind us of the painful gap between who we most truly are and the role we play in the so-called real world.” [*A Hidden Wholeness*, 15] Or as Paul might put it, there is huge gap between our life in the Spirit and our life in the flesh, and it hurts like hell.

But dealing with the gap is the first step toward healing it. Parker gives us a wonderful visual aid to understand our dilemma. You were handed a strip of paper. On one side are words like money, power, status, image, influence, impact. On the other side are more words: mind, spirit, ideas, feelings, beliefs, values. One side represents your outer or onstage life. It names the dreams and the anxieties we have and the rules we live by when it comes to our interactions with the world. The other side represents our inner or backstage life. It names the treasures and yearnings of our true self and the rich resources God has given us to relate to the world. [40]

Now, there is a relationship between our inner and outer life and it changes as we do. When we start out in life, there is no

distinction between the two. With babies, what you see is what you get. But as we grow older we start to build a wall between our inner and outer selves, between our God-given life in the Spirit and our seemingly forced-upon-us life in the flesh. That's when we go to school and learn to hide our true selves for fear that we don't measure up, that someone will laugh at us, reject us or take advantage of us. Unfortunately, the hiding and pretending doesn't stop when the bullying does. We take that deception right into our adult lives. But we take a big risk when we hide our true selves from the world and live on the other side of this wall. The risk is that we will forget that the wall is even there. We'll start to think that our false self is our only self. We'll confuse our role with our soul. [43-44]

But when we are a wall, we don't have a center. That's why much of spirituality today is about being centered, finding your center. So we learn techniques for bringing the pieces together. [making our strip of paper into a circle] Now we have a circle with a

center. That's an improvement, for sure, as we seek to circle our lives around our core values. But there's a shadow side to this part of our journey. In our efforts to circle around our inner truth, we can easily shut out the truth of others. Our spirituality starts to look like a gated community where only people who think and believe as we do are welcome. [46] That's the situation a lot of Christians are in today.

Parker has a better option. Pull apart that circle you are holding and give one end of the strip a half-twist. Now rejoin the ends. What you have in your hands is a Möbius strip, named after the German mathematician who described it. If you trace with one finger around the strip, you'll discover that the inside becomes the outside and the outside the inside. Now we are holding a powerful metaphor, a picture of life in the Spirit. This is a good model for what happens to us when we encounter the true God. When Jesus looks at us, first he sees our divided life. He sees us living our life in the flesh. But he sees more than just our false self. Jesus can see our true self, the

self we cannot see. That's the one he loves, and when we realize that our hidden self is loved, when we can accept the fact that we are accepted, our life is transformed. We are no longer living behind a wall or in a circle like a gated community. This is life on a Möbius strip, where the inside of us becomes the outside of us, and we experience and others witness our true life in the Spirit. [46-47]

This was true of the Apostle Paul and of John Wesley. Both men were living in the flesh, not in the Spirit, with a rules-oriented spirituality. Both men condemned anyone who didn't fit into their gated community. Then both men met Jesus on the journey; Paul on the Damascus Road and Wesley on Aldersgate Street. When their hearts warmed up and their walls melted down, they both found their true identity and became ministers of mercy.

You're probably familiar with their story, but let me tell you a story about someone you may not know. Wendell Potter was a public relations executive for Cigna, which is a big health insurance company. By his own account, he was a health care hit man, the one

whose job it was to snuff out stories that made his industry look bad.

Then one day in 2007, Potter finds himself at a free clinic held at the Wise County Fairgrounds in Virginia. Thousands of uninsured people had lined up for health care. The doctors were treating them on gurneys on the sidewalks and in the 4-H barns. “It looked like a refugee camp,” he said. “It just hit me like a bolt of lightning. What I was doing for a living was making it necessary for people to resort to getting care in animal stalls.”

Potter calls this his Road to Damascus experience. This was when the wall that had separated his inner life and outer life began to come crashing down. But it would take some more time before he could leave his job and his false identity. After all, he had a family and he felt trapped in his six-figure salary.

But Potter had been raised a Southern Baptist, and in his moment of crisis, he began reading the Bible and reconnecting with his faith. He discovered that Jesus was deeply engaged in providing

affordable health care. And when he worried about what to do, he took comfort in the words, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” In God’s Word, he found his true identity. The Spirit of Christ witnessed to his spirit that he was a beloved child of God, and what’s more, all those people lined up for health care were, too.

Eventually, he found the courage to quit. He said, “I felt that if I were on my death bed and looked back on my life and realized that I had not taken this risk to do the right thing, I would have huge regrets.”

Now Potter is one of the most ardent advocates for health care reform. With a new identity, he has a new role to play. His personal transformation makes him a witness for Christ in a social revolution.

What Paul calls the witness of the Spirit we might experience as a moment of extreme clarity. They don’t come that often, which is why we have to pay close attention. I just pray that when the Spirit breaks in on our false life and shows us our true life, we will be

willing to take the risk to live it. The Spirit of God wants you to take a ride on the Möbius strip. I promise you won't regret it.