

Romans 8:26-39, actually all of 8

You know the voices in your head? The voice that's eager to criticize—shaming and guiltig and judging and condemning? The internal voice that says I'm not good enough? That I don't work hard enough? That I'm insignificant and unworthy? *Do you know the voice I'm talking about?*

Romans 8 is a perfect response to the voice of the accuser. Listen to the first verses: "There is therefore now no condemnation...there is no judgment for those who are in Christ Jesus." As that soaks in, I feel my shoulders relaxing and I can breath more easily. Paul continues, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free...For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death, from the law of condemnation and judgment." What good news!

There are other voices. Another that often asserts itself is the voice of hopelessness and despair. This voice whispers that the things I care about are too big and nothing I do can possibly make a difference. Afterall, how can I possibly alter the trajectory of mass incarceration? How can I make a difference in the racism that is built into the foundation of our country? Or in the systematic occupation and oppression of Palestinians that we, as US taxpayers, are funding? And, how *on earth* will what I do or don't do possibly keep the planet from becoming uninhabitable for human beings. *Do you recognize this voice?*

Once again, we need words from Romans to resist the temptation to despair. V 26, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness...the Spirit bears us up in our stumbling; for we do not know how to pray as is necessary, but that very Spirit petitions with inexpressible groanings."

In the verses leading up to today's lectionary passage, Paul is offering a logical description of living in the Spirit. He's making an argument *for* life in the Spirit and *against* life in the flesh. And just to note, Paul is using the word *flesh*, arguing against "life in the flesh,"

or “the mindset of the flesh.” And his words have been used for a long time to denigrate the body, to deny our physicality, to shun our God-given bodied senses and sensuality.

But Paul isn’t talking about the physicality of our bodies being in opposition to the Spirit. What Paul is talking about is a particular *mindset*. He’s talking about a way of thinking that is bound by the limits of our physicality and biology. It’s an understanding that’s bound by what I can see and understand and experience in my particular body and life. We know this mindset because it’s alive and well all around us. And in us. The mindset of the flesh is the mindset that approaches life as a zero-sum game, a game that mostly we don’t even know we’re playing. But still we follow its rules, playing as though life is about winning and losing. That in life there are people on top and people on the bottom. And so we live trying to win, to be on top. In this mindset, ending racism means I lose because equality and freedom are limited commodities. This mindset keeps us complacent in the face of injustice, choosing to stand our ground to protect ourselves and our stuff rather than risk losing what is ours, what we’ve “earned” in this hard-fought game of life.

In contrast to the zero-sum mindset is the mindset of the Spirit. In the mindset of the Spirit, life isn’t a game of winning and losing, life is for *living!* The mindset of the Spirit of God is life and peace. And in the Kingdom of God, the commodities of life and peace and well-being are not limited or distributed by supply and demand economics. Life in the Spirit trusts that there is more than enough of God’s peace and love and well-being for everyone. For any one. When we live from the mindset of the Spirit, we live with the assumption and expectation, with the *hope* that everyone has equal access to the abundance of life. And access to this abundance of life and peace is not and cannot be limited or bound. Paul says it so beautifully, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, [nor walls or

checkpoints or visas], nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The mindset of life as a zero-sum game is insidious. The tempter keeps us playing the game by whispering judgment and despair into our heads. This mindset has even permeated our theology. So if we aren't been paying attention, we find ourselves believing in the god of winners and losers, a god who chooses some people while rejecting others, who saves or condemns. Fortunately this mindset is losing its grip on us. Or at least that's how I interpret what is happening. People are leaving the church because they refuse to believe in a god who rewards with heaven and punishes with hell.

The God of Jesus is a living God, a God of life and peace and love. And this is the mindset of the Spirit of God. When we live in the mindset of the Spirit, we are binding ourselves to Life, abundant life, eternal life. And in the law of Life in Christ, there is no condemnation. Living in the Spirit, there is no judgment—only freedom, peace, love. In the Spirit, we have direct and unlimited access to God's extravagant love.

The mindset of a zero-sum game is both a game of arrogance, and a game that keeps us from living into our divinely created image. When we hear the stories about Jesus and the apostles, we hear the amazing encounters they had, the amazing things they did. Miracles were commonplace. But we're quick to separate ourselves from them. “We're not Jesus,” we say. And we aren't. “We aren't the apostles.” And we aren't. But Paul insists that the Spirit of God is a Spirit of adoption. In v 16 he writes, “It is that very Spirit [of adoption] testifying with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”

We aren't Jesus. But according to Paul, and according to other NT witnesses, our inheritance as children of God is identical to Jesus' inheritance. What keeps us from living

into our inheritance? From claiming our identity as beloved child of God and witnessing everyday miracles? Perhaps one of the reasons is that we like the order that the rules of a zero-sum game provides. Jesus of course didn't play by its rules and he left a wake of chaos behind him. Jesus lived fully into his inheritance, fully in the mindset of the Spirit. It's what made him so compelling to so many. With Jesus, people experienced the love of God, the unbound and unlimited love of God. And in that love, miracles happened.

But God's love—love unbound, love unlimited, love freely distributed, love without condemnation—that love disrupts and challenges the zero-sum game. It did then, and it does today. Giving lip service to the law of love is easy; but living without judgment and condemnation and death is hard. Living outside of the law of judgment and death requires trusting the Spirit...and lots of practice. Claiming our inheritance as children of God means putting on a mindset that trusts the power of gratuitous love rather than the control of judgment and death.

Our arrogance also keeps us from claiming our inheritance. Our inheritance is life, life in the Spirit, living by the law of God's love. When we claim our inheritance as children of God, when we live in the Spirit, we forfeit control. When we take on the mindset of Spirit, we release, we submit our need to manage and manipulate the outcomes of our lives. It's our arrogance that keeps us living in an illusion that we're in control in the first place! It's our arrogance, our privilege and entitlement that wants and demands to know and determine outcomes. Our arrogance expects that we should be able to see the results of our efforts and our work. But living in the Spirit is being willing to work towards the goal whether or not we see results. The mindset of the Spirit trusts the Spirit to bring about results...when it is time. That's hope. And as Paul says, if we can see it, it isn't hope!

Life in the Spirit isn't easy. Paul isn't describing a life where, once you put on the mindset of the Spirit everything will be happily ever after. Life in the Spirit doesn't magically end oppression or racism or violence. But the beauty of the mindset of the Spirit is that when we're stumbling blindly in our work, not seeing any results, the Spirit is working right beside us. And when we don't know how to pray...and who knows how to pray for the end of racism, or the end of the Israeli occupation?...when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit is praying. With wordless groanings, with overwhelming groanings, the Spirit is bringing our petitions to God. The groanings aren't benign, tired sighs; they're the hard, heavy breathing of real pain and real labor.

One place I can easily succumb to the voice of despair is the occupation of Palestine. And the Palestinian people have been in my heart these past few weeks. Their protests in the face of new and increasing burdens of oppression and occupation have been powerful acts of hope. The images of thousands of men, Muslim and Christian, lining up and filling the streets of Jerusalem in prayer is an amazing refusal to play the 0-sum game of empire.

In my brief time in Israel/Palestine, I was moved, again and again, by the profound hope in the people we met, the people who told us their stories of injustice and oppression and occupation. But again and again, I saw persons who were claiming their inheritance as God's children, refusing the condemnation of occupation. They were living in the hope of life and peace. Even though they couldn't see it, they were living into the hope that one day, perhaps for their children, or their children's children, the occupation would be ended and they would be free. Their hope and their refusal to play the 0-sum game was just as logical and just as reasoned as Paul's. They had no interest in defeating or dominating their enemies; instead, their hope is in a reality of living side-by-side, Israelis and Palestinians, Muslims and Jews and Christians.

We have a choice. We can listen to and engage the voice of the accuser, or we can listen to the voice of the Spirit. Just as Jesus listened to the voice of the Spirit, the one that said, You are my beloved, we too can listen to Spirit telling us that we are loved. That our neighbors are loved. That our enemies are loved. And when the tempter's voice invites us to play the 0-sum game, we can trust that the Spirit is praying with us and for us. And like Jesus, we can respond with Scripture: "There is no judgment...for the law of the Spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death....And *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."