

Romans 8:12-17

Muscle memory--the ability to reproduce a particular movement without conscious thought, acquired as a result of frequent repetition of that movement: "typing relies heavily on muscle memory." Martial arts—story of Peacemaker Academy person who had learned martial arts in Chicago: summary = difficult to retrain what's in muscle memory.

Analogy of muscle memory as it relates to faith, as it relates to our identity in Christ, in this passage.

Is the muscle memory of our identity based in Christ or in something else? On this Trinity Sunday, have we practiced, repeated our reliance on the Spirit until it has become without conscious thought, or spiritual muscle memory?

Practicing our identity as adopted children of God gives us strength and resilience to face whatever challenges/suffering that comes.

Paul is responding to concrete questions and issues of this new body of Jesus followers. Often seen as systematic theology, but remember it has a context.

- a. enslavement to fear. What were the Romans –new Christians, Jews, and Gentiles—afraid of? Persecution, suffering, rejection for being loyal to Jesus instead of Ceasar? Fear of dying?
- b. Vs. 14—**All** who are led by God’s spirit are God’s sons and daughter.”  
Based on this verse and others, I believe that they had Questions about their identity, their belonging as a diverse group of people— was there a system of ranking in their church? Based on different identity markers—Jew/Gentile; slave/free; male/female; social class.
- c. Are we hilflos ausgeliefert—helpless to resist doing wrong?  
condemnation

Paul tries to persuade Roman church that Jesus makes a difference in all these issues. Starts with --There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. The Spirit lives in you and brings you into freedom. So live as adopted children of God.

Practice it, repeat it, until it becomes muscle memory.

And the Spirit of God will help the church in Rome do that. Here’s how that looks:

- a. Get out of a mindset of condemnation. Even though you fail. Instead, focus on living in courage, in strength and freedom from enslavement to fear.

- b. Base your belonging and ranking on the foundation that is Jesus Christ. Nothing else. You belong because God adopted you and filled you with the Spirit.
- ALL who are led by the Spirit are God's sons and daughters. No other criteria, so get rid of your ranking system. We're in a kinship here.
- c. Vs. 15-16. Life in the Spirit brings mystical faith into our lived reality, belief/confidence/assurance that there is something beyond ourselves. The spirit gives witness to that reality. Not just mystical but like what we heard about in John 17— *a God-infused reality taking shape in the present. Now and not yet.* We know that God is with us. We are not alone.
- d. We recognize God's activity—cooperate with what God is doing because this spirit lives in us, guides us, empowers us to say no to the works of the flesh and yes to life in the Spirit.
- e. Vs. 17--Being adopted by God and living in the Spirit doesn't mean we'll be exempt from suffering and hardship. Paul says it here and Peter talks about it in 1 Peter and throughout the NT, that suffering means you're identified with Christ, you've been initiated into the Jesus club! It's part of life, it's momentary, nothing compared to the

glory ahead, so accept it and especially if it's because of your faith, even embrace it. Take comfort in knowing Jesus suffered too.

How does this apply to our lives today? Is there anything from the Roman context and Paul's encouragement to that church that helps us, enlightens us?

- a. Fear—enslavement to fear. Fear is an appropriate emotion, it's enslavement to fear that is the problem. Fear of losing what we love, fear of losing our identity that's attached to different things we do or different groups we belong to, fear of the unknown, fear of death. How do we know when we are beyond natural fear and into enslavement to fear territory.
  1. We know we're enslaved when we follow our human instinct to double down in resisting change, in order to preserve what we know and love.
  2. Or we give up our own agency and refuse to participate in decision-making,
  3. or we live in denial as long as possible.
- b. Ranking and belonging: All you need to do is walk down the hallway of a Jr. High to see systems of ranking and belonging. For some reason, humanity

likes creating definitions of who's in and who's out and letting everyone know about it.

- c. Is our own sheer willpower the only thing we can count on to overcome doing the things we know we shouldn't and doing the things we should? Is there any help to be had? Are we alone in the world, even as Christians? How do we KNOW that God's spirit is with us?

I think we can relate to some of the questions and struggles of the Roman church. Hesitant about timeless, objective truth—Gen X post-Christian, post-modern, truth is relative. But here I think we have one--the truth is that we are adopted children of God. It's not just believing intellectually, but living into that truth as the Spirit enables us until it becomes muscle memory—yes, I am a beloved adopted child of God, there is no condemnation for me, and the Spirit enlivens me and sets me free. As God's children, we together are living in a God-infused present reality. Spirit witnesses to that reality in us and gives us eyes to recognize it.

Some ideas for ways we can apply what we have talked about:

- a. Check our sense of identity. Ask ourselves questions about our sense of identity in Christ. It's not just workaholics that are *overly attached* to one aspect of their lives. It's not that we can't have unique

personalities, interests, hobbies, things we work really hard for. It's about over-attachment that replaces our basic fundamental identity as an adopted child of God. Anyone can be overly-attached: to parenting, care-giving, social justice work, taking the path of least resistance.

- b. When we feel afraid, what is our muscle memory doing unconsciously? When what feels threatening and unwelcome comes our way, what is our pattern? Are we developing this faith muscle memory to help us to face our fears. Can we hear the words of Paul, that as adopted children of God, we aren't left alone, we aren't left helpless, we aren't left resorting to checking out, giving up, fighting to get our way. Let God's spirit set us free and keep us free!
- c. Challenging ourselves to do away with any conscious or subconscious ranking system and levels of belonging in the church. Instead, having eyes to see others as children of God, beloved, working on their faith muscle memory. Choose to support one another as equals as we undo ranking systems.
- d. Explore and nurture Our identity in Christ--based in a relationship, with a triune God. We know we're doing that when, without

conscious thought, we cry out “Abba, Father” in our times of need, times of temptation, failure, times of distress and fear.

Times of joy and praise and gratitude. Live into that relationship, make that your muscle memory.

Just as we develop muscle memory for our daily lives by repeated actions until they become automatic, so also let us develop muscle memory in our faith, so that we may be anchored in our relationship with God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That we, like the church in Rome, identify as God’s children and heirs, because the Spirit lives in us and sets us free.