

“Life and Peace” / Romans 8:1-11 / 6 April 2014

“To set the mind on the flesh is death,” the Apostle Paul admonishes his readers, “but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace.” The things you think about in private, the secret thoughts you entertain, the dreams, and the hopes, and even the memories that you choose to revisit, these things will set a course for your life. If you choose to dwell on things that do not endure, things that go the way of all flesh, then you're setting yourself up for disappointment, for all these things are subject to change and decay. But if you choose to dwell on things of “ultimate importance,” the things of the spirit, then your lot will be life and peace.

The greatest struggle in life is just to gain perspective on which things matter and which things don't. When I was in seminary, I asked a seasoned pastor what the key to his success had been, and he told me, “Love your people.” I scoffed. “If all you need is love, then why the tens of thousands of dollars in student debt? Why Hebrew classes?” I just couldn't believe that love was enough...until the day when I did believe it.

My seminary classmates and I used to get into heated arguments about things that mattered so urgently...holy things, things of ultimate importance. It was world-changing stuff...if your world was exactly nine acres in size, if your world ended at the tall metal picket fence that divided the park-like lawns of our divinity school from the loud crime-ridden neighborhood that pulsed all around us—East Liberty before gentrification. Just outside our protective wall, adolescents were dropping out of school and getting high on crack cocaine; teenage girls were having babies. Behind the dark facades of faded 19th century mansions and townhouses—all of which had been converted into apartments—whole families lived in cycles of poverty and hopelessness, but they were more or less invisible to us. And we hurried past them from seminary to coffee shop, from seminary to bookstore. Yes, we discussed things of universal consequence, like whether in the rite of holy baptism you should sprinkle, or pour even—I can't believe I'm saying it—dunk! We argued about the nature of the Trinity; does it function like a committee of three, or is it just that we've experienced God in three different ways? We argued about how to parse a certain Greek verb and how your grammatical choice would affect the Truth (with a capital T). Should clergy wear their collars? Communion in the pews or up front, served with bread or Cheerios? We pondered long and hard over whether it was acceptable to tell personal stories from the pulpit—I diverged from accepted practice on that one. We debated the question that still haunts some of us, if we're honest: Are all the world's problems due to serious defects in human nature, and if so, what does that say about the One who created humanity with such design flaws? And doesn't it all finally come down to the question of whether any of us really has personal freedom?

All those things seemed so vitally important at the time, when the real world was still a year or two away, and when a tall iron picket fence still separated us from it. But then we got landed out in parishes where we stand in our pulpits of a Sunday morning, and there we might see out in the pews a family wrecked by abuse, an elderly couple choosing between medication and food, a mother heartbroken that her teenager won't speak to her, a father trying to hide his substance abuse from the family he loves. All manner of people gathering in worship, bringing with them their assorted joys and sadness, their strangeness, and loneliness, and happiness, and hopes. And in moments like that, it takes a very stubborn soul to continue to care more about Greek verbs than about human need, human love, the great, aching hungers of the soul and indeed the body, too. It takes a hardhearted person to stand in the pulpit of a Sunday and continue to insist that talk about God matters more than actions, that creeds matter more than people. Indeed, most of those inflexible fellows don't last very long as pastors. They're all working at Radio Shack now. I'm not saying that theology doesn't matter; of course it does. I am saying that a pastor can berate his or her parishioners for not knowing all the books of the Bible and not knowing how to pray in public, or else be grateful to them for showing up most weeks, and serving on committees, and doing the best they can, for bringing their life's passions, and pains, and playfulness within earshot of the pulpit. “Love your people.” It's still the best advice I've ever gotten about how to do this job—though I often fail. But isn't love the best advice whatever your calling in

life?

Think about your own life and its passions and drives, the things you just had to accomplish or possess. How many of them matter ten years later? Some, not all. We spend the best years of our lives striving for things...things with four doors that eventually end up getting crushed in a compactor and left to rust in the rain, things with four bedrooms that we sell in the end, in order to pay for all we ever really needed, which is (as one song puts it) "a clean room with a window and some Prozac in warm milk." There are things that seem vitally important at the time. There are things that occupy all our thoughts and energies right up until the day when they don't, the day when we realize within ourselves which things matter and which do not. "To set the mind on the flesh is death," the Apostle Paul admonishes his readers, "but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace." In other words, you can wander through the decades dwelling on all the wrong things, putting all your limited store of energies into causes and things that ultimately matter little. And if you do that, you will be disappointed because you will see the things that matter to you going the way of all flesh. Alternatively, you can throw your thoughts and energies into things that matter much, and if you do that, you will know what the Apostle Paul calls "life and peace."

We all dwell on something. We all live with longing, or anger, or unspoken desire. We all have things that color our inner landscape, and those things will end up shaping our public face as well, whether we like it or not. We all live with old ideas that suggest themselves to us over and over again. Some people nurture old hurts anew each day, never allowing them to heal. Some look to the future with dread and project upon it all the worst imaginings of yesterday and today. Some dwell upon pride, or possessions, or achievements, all of which will one day falter and fade. But worse than all of these, there is a darkness that broods over whole nations and societies, a culture of convenience and consumption that saves nothing for the children of tomorrow, a sense of entitlement that says "what's mine is mine," a combativeness that says "winner take all." A savage voice whispers in our ears today, "Your happiness is what matters. You're a self-made person. You have earned all that you have. It's your right to look out for number one, cause no one out there is looking out for you. You've got to get all you can. You've got to take what you can, for there is nothing but this."

It's a voice born of hopelessness, and the people who heed it are not evil. Indeed, all of us live under the influence of this sinister voice because it has made itself heard in everything from our TV commercials to our political discourse. But to dwell upon its lies is the way of death, for it means investing all our God-given energies and abilities into things and causes that will in the end go the way of all flesh.

Sin! A very old man in Brussels went to his priest to confess. He said, "Father, forgive me for I have sinned. I hid a man in my attic during the Nazi occupation in World War II." The priest said, "That's hardly a sin, my son. It's an act of heroism!" The old man said, "Well, let me finish, father. He was a wealthy man, so I charged him \$500 per week, to be paid out of his Swiss bank account." The priest paused then said, "Well, I agree that wasn't very nice, but I wouldn't call it a sin. And the war's been over these seventy years." The man said, "Oh, thank you, father. That eases my mind. Well, I should go. It's almost time to feed the guy in my attic." This reading from the Book of Romans makes frequent mention of the word "sin." It's not a word that we throw around lightly here at Bower Hill Church. It's an ugly word that gets used freely and harmfully in so many other places, that we tend to use it only sparingly. And yet, what is sin if not setting one's heart and mind on things that don't matter, all the while overlooking those things that do? Sin is the brokenness of the world, dwelling not on the good and the beautiful, but on all that keeps it broken.

There's an episode of the old TV sitcom *Seinfeld*, where George Costanza's crotchety, mean-spirited old father takes up the mantra "Serenity now!" whenever his abrasive wife, Estelle, gets on his nerves. She criticizes the way he drives, and he yells to the heavens, "Serenity now!" She complains about his shoddy business practices, so he looks upward and declares, "Serenity now!" As if serenity can be demanded! As if serenity can arrive all at once. If you've ever experienced a deep sense of

peace in times of crisis, loneliness, trouble, or pain, then you are aware that it comes as a mystery, sometimes unbidden, and its surprise appearance changes everything. It comes when we need it if we invest in it, if we dwell on it, when we do not especially feel the need for it.

There is a small part of eternity hidden away within each of us, and it needs to be reminded of itself. It needs to hear echoes of itself, to see images of itself, in our daily living. There's a small bit of eternity deep inside each of us, and it must be dwelled upon, called out into the light. There is a mystery beyond our knowing, a joy beyond our manufacture, a quiet assurance that will remain with us and resurface when we most need it. But in order for that to happen, it has to be invested in, developed, drawn out into the light and nurtured into growth. The problem with conditioning oneself to the things of the spirit is that while it's often deeply enriching, it's also slow. It's satisfying, but not usually thrilling. One way to cultivate the life of the spirit is to bring your supply of troubles and trivialities here each week, within the bounds of the church, and thus to put your daily living into conversation with an ancient faith, its stories, its rituals, its community. Another way to nurture the life of the spirit is to seek out those things that give you a sense of the good, or the true, or the beautiful in our world. What are those things for you?

One of the great struggles in life is just to gain perspective on which things matter and which things don't. In the end, we each of us choose the things that we spend our energies and our time on. Choose carefully, for you alone can decide what you will dwell on. "To set the mind on the spirit is life