

## Sermon

July 16, 2023 [Romans 8:1-11]

*Is the Christian Faith Relevant?*

Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace this morning to each of you, and peace, from God, the Creator and from the Source of Salvation, Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

It's ironic, at a service where we have probably the lowest attendance I've seen in months, that I ask the question, "Is the Christian faith relevant?" As church attendance declines throughout the country, as well as across denominations, and as the fastest-growing religious demographic are the "nones," that is, those who claim "none" when it comes to religious affiliation, congregations like ours must ask and answer one simple question: Has our faith, the Christian faith, lost its relevance to people living in the modern, or indeed, postmodern world?

People who are moderate in mentality and secular in sensibility, the so-called "spiritual" say, but not "religious."

If so, what happens? How did the faith of the church become irrelevant, and what, if anything, can we do – a tiny congregation tucked away in the heart of Queen Anne – about it?

Now as you might imagine, the question of Christianity's relevance is actually not something new. It didn't arise with the most recent trends in religious demographics. In 1963, the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, big surprise, made it the focus of three public lectures he gave in Berkeley, California. These lectures were the culmination of a long, distinguished and sometimes embattled career. Indeed, by the 1950s, Tillich had been dubbed "America's most dangerous theologian" for challenging conventional notions of God, including the idea that God exists, at least in the way we do. Now 76, Tillich mounts the podium, as indisputably the most-praised and also the most-questioned theologian in North America, if not the world. An overflow audience waits with bated breath. Fundamentalists as well as radicals picket outside – this is after all, Berkeley – and Tillich knows half his audience are pastors, while others are university intellectuals, divinity scholars, and spiritual mavericks in every state of doubt. (Sounds a little bit like our congregation, doesn't it?) Here in a poignantly compact three hours, Tillich has to summarize his entire career of *mediating*, which is to say, of going back and forth between the Gospel and the modern world.

Now in a moment, I'm going to give you the gist of Tillich's response to the question of whether Christianity, or more specifically the Christian message, is relevant to people today, how he argues that the Christian faith and message can indeed be relevant again to modern people.

But first, I want to make my own case for how the Christian faith can be relevant, not broadly to the modern world, but to each of you, to each of us sitting here or listening today. That is: What kind of difference if any, can the Christian faith make in our daily lives? What a question! Why don't pastors preach that more often? (There is a pastor of course, at Ballard First Lutheran I know who preaches this quite frequently.) But among the other pastors, I know I find myself wondering this question. Why aren't we asking more often the question of what difference, if anything, Christianity can make in our daily lives?

I'm asking that, and I want to answer it by turning from Paul Tillich to the Apostle Paul, and something absolutely astonishing he says in Romans 8, our second reading. (By the way, that reference to Ballard First Lutheran was because we have one of its pastors in our pews this morning, and we're very delighted to see him here.)

Let's look at Romans 8 together as printed in your bulletin. Set your eyes first on verse 2. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death." This, I would argue, is central to Paul's message.

When I was in seminary, we were taught to ask two questions in this regard: Free *from* what? and Free *for* what?

In this case, free from the powers of sin and death, the powers that grip us and compel us to do things that are not in our best interest, much less the interest of our neighbor, things that are comparable to addictions today. We are set free from that power, Paul says. We have been "called to freedom," Paul says elsewhere in Galatians. So, at the heart of the Christian message is being freed from these worldly powers that compel us to idolatry; that compel us to worship things that are beneath the glory of God; that compel us to live lives of bondage and captivity.

Now take a look at verse 4b. This is the second half of the verse. Here we learn about those who walk "not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." Now historically, many Christians, myself excluded, have interpreted this as a

reference to the body and the soul. The flesh is the body; it's bad, it's evil. The soul is the Spirit. It's good, it's transcendent. Feminist theologians have pointed out that the body is often identified with the female body, and the soul identified with the self-transcended, male ego. That is a very problematic interpretation of Paul, and I would argue that it's a misinterpretation.

When Paul refers here to spirit and flesh, he's referring to two ways of being in the world. Two ways of being in the world: one oriented towards self, given over to the various idols of the age. The other, as I said before, called to freedom in Jesus Christ, such that we become, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, men and women, indeed people, for others.

So we've heard about this. We've heard this message of being set free. We've heard this distinction Paul will make repeatedly in his letters, between the flesh and the spirit again, two different – let me go full-on nerd here – existential orientations, one that leads to death, like an addiction, the other that leads to life, which is the spirit.

Notice, finally, verse 11. Here Paul says, at the end of our passage, "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies, also, through His Spirit that dwells in you."

You hear those words, "mortal bodies"? Paul here is talking about the resurrection in *present terms*, not something simply that happened bodily to Jesus some 2000 years ago in the backwaters of the Roman Empire, but something that is *always* happening, or at least always *potentially* happening in the life of the believers: resurrection in the present tense, resurrection in present terms, resurrection as not something to be believed, but something to be *lived*. Now if you think this is odd, think again. Paul says the same thing in Romans 4:17 where he writes,

"I have made you the father of many nations" (Paul's quoting here; that's God speaking to Abraham in the book of Genesis) – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

Notice again, "who gives life to the dead," not simply life after death, but life to the living dead. The so-called dead souls.

And again, Colossians 3:1 – “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” This is another way of distinguishing life in the Spirit, the risen life, with life in the flesh, the old Adam, that which needs to be killed, which otherwise leads to death.

Well, now, you might be saying yourself, this complicates what it means to be Christian, a little bit, doesn't it? Again, instead of merely believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus as an event that took place once upon a time in the not-so-distant past, Paul says *you have to live it*. You've heard this story before, a former colleague of mine from Pacific Lutheran University, was approached by a very conservative student who pressed him on the question of resurrection. “Do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ?” He charged my friend, his professor, to which my friend replied, “Absolutely, I tried to live it every day.”

Believing in the bodily resurrection is easy. It simply requires cognitive assent, but *living* the resurrection is something else. The resurrection here is a new way of life, something available to us in the here and now, on *this* side of the grave. A life, in the words of our Gospel reading for today, that frees us from “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth,” a life liberated from the need to be seen, (as is the case for many would be influencers), a life liberated from the need to be first, the need to be noticed, the need to be more successful than your neighbor. Yes, it's easy to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but wow! – Try living it. No wonder we need help from the Spirit of God, as Paul says in verse 11. And here's the good news. Here's the astonishing news. Here's the great news: God promises to give you and me this Spirit, this same animating and renewing power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead! That is promised to you! And here's the even better part: We don't have to die, or rather wait to die, to experience this power. It's available to us here and now! The Spirit will give life to your mortal bodies, Paul says, by dwelling in each of you!

Now, let me put to everyone gathered here, as well as those listening online, a single question. Just one question:

“Is this the kind of life you want to live?”

I'm asking each of you this moment. Is this the kind of life you want to live? A life freed from the cares of the world, and all the empty promises of fulfillment – and believe me, I know this by way of experience – the empty promises of

fulfillment, the idols of our age, that come with everything from the lure of wealth to the idol of success. I often think here of that line from 1 Timothy, where the author states that it's "the love of money that is the root of all evil." Money is something that we need for the sake, in this case, of an economy, but it's the *love* of money, what St. Ignatius of the Catholic tradition calls "the disordered attachment," that is akin here to the lure of wealth. Success isn't bad, but making success your reason for being? Again, an empty promise, reflected of these cares of the world.

Are you moved, moreover, by Martin Luther's understanding, of dying with Christ and being raised to new life as a *daily occurrence*, not something for which we wait in the future, but a daily occurrence available to each of us now, one where you live and *practice* the resurrection – think about that – rather than simply believing it happened to a man 2000 years ago, again, in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. One is historical, the other as I believe, Paul is, is existential. One where you live for others instead of only for yourself.

And guess what? If all these things sound appealing to you, if this new way of life, available to you each day, sounds attractive, you've just proven the relevance, or at least the potential relevance, of the Christian faith and life!

I don't know about you, but I know for me, this is the kind of life I want to live. A life that Shankara, a famous religious thinker of India, once described as "liberation while living."

But how do I do it? How do we do it? Well, let me offer three quick suggestions.

First – and I'm really preaching to the choir here – keep coming to church. Keep coming to church. I know that there were many obstacles between you and our worship service today, or at least there have been. I know that there are many obstacles generally to attending worship. Compared to 50 years ago, the church is no longer supported by our surrounding culture, and I think the best example of that is the fact that youth sports are scheduled on Sunday mornings. The surrounding culture doesn't give two bits about the church; in fact, in many cases, it's hostile to it. It's for that reason, all the more, that I advise you if you wish to live the resurrection faith, *keep coming to church*, because in church – speaking of sports – this is the place where we *practice* living the resurrection by reconciling ourselves to each other, for example, in the sharing of the peace. So

that's my first suggestion. Practice living the resurrection, which is something we do in a worship service. Keep doing, as my Uncle Bill used to say, what you're doing now: come to church.

Number two, instead of looking at your phone or grumbling, as I sometimes do, begin your day by reading a verse from Scripture. Think about how that can frame your entire day. You heard a great one last week from the Gospel of Matthew, 11:28-30, "Come to me," Jesus says, "all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." What a powerful way to begin your day. Instead of looking at your phone or grumbling, begin your day by reading a verse from Scripture.

Third, and finally, pray for the Spirit to dwell within you, to free you from the cares of the world, so that you may live for others as God intended. The only way to make the Christian faith relevant, as you can see, is to live it; to live the resurrection as a daily possibility, opportunity and occurrence in your lives. It's not an abstract answer meant for the broader culture. It's an answer for you and me. Start with us here. Live the resurrection here and now, and you will make the faith relevant to our times.

Back in 1963, Paul Tillich answered the question a little differently than I did for you today. For him, the Christian faith must address the most widespread predicament of the modern world, namely, the problem of meaninglessness, the problem of life without purpose, the attitude that nothing really matters. Broadly speaking, I still think that's true. There's a reason why Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Southern California, happens to be the second-best selling author on Amazon. His book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, sold over 60 million copies. This problem remains as acute today as it was in 1963, when Paul Tillich gave those lectures.

But in the end, I would say the only way to make Christianity relevant to our lives again, is to live it.

May God help make our faith relevant to us,  
by raising us to new life each and every day.

And all God's people said, "Amen."