

July 20, 2008

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 13 (Romans 8:12-25)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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“All who are led by the spirit of God are children of God.”

And so we come to the pivotal point in St. Paul's argument in his epistle to the Romans. We've been reading it all summer, and this incredibly difficult and almost turgid passage is the linchpin in much of Paul's argument about what it means to be saved and what is our hope for salvation in the future.

It's as though we are talking about people on a journey who have already left Egypt and not yet arrived in the Promised Land. In fact, the Exodus is the background for Paul's whole epistle, and when he says, “you are led by the Spirit,” he's talking about the indwelling spirit that has replaced the pillar of cloud that led the wandering underclass who were escaped Egypt as slaves – the pillar of cloud that led them by day, and a pillar of fire that led them by night as they were formed into a people in the wilderness. Paul is writing to a people who already know something of the first fruits of salvation.

This lesson does not make sense, I am persuaded, unless we have already committed ourselves irrevocably to following Jesus, in whatever form that takes, in whatever community of faith that takes. In whatever ways we have appropriated that language, or language similar to it, we have made a commitment. We have said ‘yes’ to God and begun to receive the first fruits of the promise. If we haven't, this passage won't make sense, and we won't really know the promise of the perspective it offers. It's rather like if you've ever tried to teach Sunday School or a Bible study to people who are not already stirred to be interested in the Bible -- the Bible is dull for the most part. And yet, if someone has already been stirred by the Spirit, the Bible is a place to go for real insight and real hope and real possibility. It doesn't work unless we have first made a commitment.

And so St. Paul is talking about our being led, our being led by an indwelling spirit, and that leadership for the interim time before the world is clearly a world of righteousness and justice and peace. That way of being led is a word to those of us who are on the journey, who are along the way, who are, if you like, in the wilderness. We have left Egypt, and are being led towards something else. And that something else toward which we are being led is not back to Egypt. It's not back to slavery.

Now, I have recently taken a journey and unavoidably find myself thinking about that journey in relationship to this one that Paul is talking about. Sage and Alexander and Joanne and Ruthie and I had two weeks together traveling in Europe. It was absolutely fantastic, the \$10 Coca-Colas notwithstanding. (It was breathtakingly expensive!) But here's the thing. We had a vision of the holiday, how it was going to be a holiday for everyone. We weren't going to be governed by a five-year-old or an eleven-year-old, or a sixteen-year-old, or a forty-something or a fifty-something-year-old, even though any of

us might have liked it that way. We were going to make sure it was a holiday for everybody. So, for the most part, we did things together. But sometimes we separated and did things individually and came back together at lunch and talked about what was going on. We were, in a sense, still working on a family holiday even when we were doing things separately. It was almost as though we were being led by a kind of indwelling spirit, shaped by a previous vision.

And what that means is -- and it's of great concern to Paul -- is that the Spirit does *not* mean, and being a child of God does *not* mean "anything goes." He's worried about morality. He doesn't mean "everybody do your own thing." He doesn't mean you have no relation with anyone else. Sometimes he's thought to be talking about "the flesh" as being worried about sexual immorality in some way, shape, or form, but what it's *really* about is about what happens when we start placing ourselves and our self-gratification before the pleasure of the other. Because one of the things that happened, remember, in the wilderness, is that the people were formed into a community. They were formed into the people of God, where each mattered to the other, and right relationship was held up as the sign of God's grace.

And so Paul's concerned for those who have tasted the first fruits of salvation, who have begun to know what it means to be freed and liberated and forgiven and healed. He's concerned that we know that doesn't mean we get to do whatever we want without some concern for the other, without some vision that holds everybody together, where the vision is what dominates, and not one group or another group seeking power. Morality means being concerned for the other. And if we do that, one of the things we will often find is that we start to fear.

Those of you who've followed the Lambeth Conference and international Anglican fighting and so on will recognize that there's a great deal of jockeying for power, and fear of what we will lose if someone else gains, and people taking their toys and going home. And Paul says, "No, you're *not* going to be led to a spirit of fear if you know that you are not just a tourist, not just a temporary visitor on this journey. You're a committed person on this journey, and so you are adopted, you are beloved children of God, you are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, and that makes *all* the difference. You will *not* be led back into slavery. You will *not* be led into fear. But you will hold fast the hope and the vision that makes sense of everything for everyone." "The whole of creation," he says, "is groaning in travail." It's like labor pains, he says. And that leads him to talk about suffering, which is an inevitable part of the journey.

Now, he doesn't cover the depths of suffering in this passage, he simply gives a little perspective to it. Anyone's who's taken a travel abroad has come across what English xenophobia likes to call "Spanish tummy." It's a necessary part of much travel abroad. And for the one who's undergoing it, it is a form of suffering. And it can, suffering can in fact change the whole plan of the group, and "shift the vision" temporarily. And I'm here to tell you, it does that! And yet it doesn't change the fundamental vision. It doesn't change the joy of the holiday. It might mean we do something this day instead of that day. It doesn't mean that we're not still heading to the promised land. It might *feel* as

though we're in the wilderness, but suffering, Paul says, you need to take in perspective of the whole of what we are promised. And however bad it is, it's not as bad as that which will be revealed as the whole of creation is renewed in the service of the liberation of humanity. That's what Paul's talking about. It's an extraordinary vision. And he holds out a real and holy hope.

My brothers and sister, we have death all around us. We have death in the form of being lured toward self-gratification left, right, and center. We have death in the form of fear, which leads to grasping for power, even in the church, even in the body that is being even now redeemed. And Paul says, "No, you don't have to live that way. That irrevocable commitment to following Jesus as the way of life grants you perspective, the long-term. It grants you status: it says you are a beloved child of God, and no one can take that away from you. You can turn your back on it, but it's a gift beyond measure, and you have no need to fear when you know you are loved. And yes, it won't be easy, this journey, there's no promise that you will avoid suffering. But when you suffer, it's part of a bigger picture. Hold fast, and remember that love conquers death." Paul's argument is being encapsulated in this passage from Romans. It's not an accident that we often read it at funerals.

So in a time of silence, I'd like you to take time for prayer to remember and give thanks for the fact that you are a beloved child of God. That you are led by the spirit, and that leading makes you a part of a community that cares for the other and is not driven by self-gratification. And that it gives you perspective, a broad sweep, a long view, an ability not to be anxious about what you will wear, or what you will eat, or who's in charge, or who's winning -- but instead, the perspective that allows you to live faithfully, in love, doing what matters, right now, today.

In silence, and in response to the Gospel, let us pray.