

“A Slice of Romans, Part V: Flesh”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 24th 2017 (16th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Romans 13: 8-14

*And so, let us live honorably as in the day,
not in reveling and drunkenness,
not in debauchery and licentiousness,
not in quarreling and jealousy.
Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ,
and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Well: leave it to Paul...who last week managed to lead us into a consideration of one hot-button topic (religion and politics) only to drag us—some of us kicking and screaming—to this morning’s consideration of that other hot-button topic: religion and sex. And yes...I’ll acknowledge off the top that there is much more at play in this morning’s reading than human sexuality. That’s true. But the fact that Paul’s list of things he wants his readers to avoid includes the Greek word “koitais”—translated in my version by the English word debauchery—the placement of that word on Paul’s list of no-noes, makes it pretty hard to pretend that human sexuality is not part and parcel of the package of concerns Paul brings to this portion of his letter to the Romans. And yes:

Even at the best of times, that’s a topic many of us in the mainline Protestant church would just as soon avoid welcoming into our midst, especially if it comes from the perspective of an ancient document that appears to regard sexuality as a problem to be managed rather than a gift to be celebrated. On the one hand, we know full well that we Christians have a reputation for being somewhat curmudgeonly where such matters are concerned. On the other hand, we have lived through (and are still living through) one of the most tempestuously dramatic times of change in the history of the human race, in terms of the way in which our culture views human sexuality. As members of the United Church of Canada, we are certainly no strangers to those changes: changes which have impacted our denomination in ways very few of us would have anticipated, say, fifty years ago, although those changes were quietly beginning to percolate long before that time. And so yes: just as it would have been tempting to skip the politics last Sunday, it would be no less tempting to skip the sex-talk this Sunday. But frankly that would be just as significant an oversight, since our identity as sexual beings is no less pronounced than our identity as political animals. It’s part of the fabric of our humanity; as Paul (and also Jesus) make plain, it is therefore part of the fabric of the way in which we are called to respond to the Gospel. And so let’s venture forth...but let’s begin by getting our bearings.

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From the outset, it’s important to recall that Paul’s primary aim throughout the section of this letter we have been pondering the past four weeks, is to encourage his readers to offer themselves in response to the Gospel. Recall his language at the outset: appealing for us to bring a *living sacrifice* to God, in other words an offering of

our very lives. Recall, as well, his insistence that we should be prepared to stand against the tide: to avoid *conformity* in order to be available to the *transforming* energy of God's Spirit. And yes: if you know anything about the decadence that was part and parcel of life in the pagan world of ancient Rome, remember that Paul, when he speaks of non-conformity, has in view precisely the self-indulgence—and at times the wonton cruelty—of that larger culture. At any rate...

At any rate: all of these themes reach their apex when Paul—at the beginning of the section we heard this morning—speaks of love, making use of the distinctive Greek word with which Paul came to designate the specific sort of love he has in mind for Christians: *agape* love, self-giving love. *Owe no one anything*, writes Paul. *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law*. Notice the way in which Paul uses this talk of love, to return to one of the themes that animate his letter to the Romans, namely that Christ came to fulfill that to which the law, at its best, had but pointed. It's sometimes said that Paul was anti-law, that he had no respect for the commandments that Moses had transmitted to ancient Israel. But that's an over-simplification of Paul's perspective. On the one hand, he believed that Christ had accomplished something the law had failed to accomplish: namely, putting things right between humanity and its God. On the other hand, he also believed that the law was genuinely given to ancient Israel, that it served a crucial function for its time and that, while it may well have failed to achieve what Christ succeeded in achieving, that its ongoing value was to show us that love was the indispensable ingredient in our response to the Gospel. And so he speaks of the negative commandments, the "shall-nots", as pointing to love: God's no to murder, to theft, to adultery, to covetousness. And so he speaks of the commandment to love neighbor as one would love oneself as an even more pointed reminder that the law, rightly understood, is all about love. That's at the heart of Paul's message, no less than it is at the heart of Christ's message. Love is where it's at! Love is the beginning and the end of all God's ways! And love is at the beginning and the end when it comes to our response to the love that has been shown to us. Let's never lose sight of that positive foundation: a positive foundation Paul is as eager to put in place as was his Lord. Nevertheless!

No less than his Lord, Paul was well aware that we human beings are not instinctively loving. Much as we might like to celebrate, with Irving Berlin, the joys of "doin' a what comes naturally," for most of us—pretty much from the time we are children—love is an impulse that needs to be encouraged, hand in hand with a wide array of impulses that need to be gently discouraged. Paul knows that: and so, having named love as the goal, he proceeds to remind us of some of the things that can keep us from that goal. The first thing he names is something I would describe as "complacency". Complacency. Which is to say: our illusion that we have all the time in the world in which to live those lives of love to which we claim to aspire. And so Paul writes: *Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...* No theme is nearer to Paul's heart than this one, with its sense of urgency. And no theme—and here we can speak with a fair degree of decisiveness—

no theme was nearer to Christ's own heart than this one, with its sense of urgency. From the instant he issued his urgent appeal to Andrew and Peter, James and John to lay aside their fishing nets so that they could come and follow, to his insistence upon that final pilgrimage to Jerusalem despite the likely consequences of that pilgrimage, Jesus made it clear that he not only preached the immanent arrival of God's Kingdom, but that he was prepared to expend his own life in anticipation of its arrival. And so yes: by that standard our own complacency...our own tendency to think we've got all the time in the world...falls miserably short of the mark. *Now is the time for you to wake from sleep!* As uncomfortable as that may make us, that's a message that never gets stale. But, of course, there is more.

Having named our complacency as one of the key reasons we fail to live-love as lavishly as we might, Paul then goes further, listing a handful of items that he regards as epitomizing the way of the flesh. The Greek word here is the word *sarx*. S-A-R-X: a tricky word in the New Testament, because it has many different connotations. Sometimes it simply names the fact that we are, in fact, flesh covered creatures, we human beings. Sometimes it conjures up the fact that our flesh makes us vulnerable creatures, mortal creatures. But sometimes—and this is the overtone Paul gives it here, and also in his letter to the Galatians...sometimes flesh refers not just to our humanity, not just to our vulnerability, not just to our mortality, but to our fallenness: our brokenness. And so here in Romans—and also in Galatians—he provides a list of the things that the flesh prompts us to indulge. In Romans he writes: *let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.* That six-item list is a condensation of the even longer list he provided earlier in his ministry, in his letter to the Galatians to whom he wrote: *Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy,^[e] drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.* And notice, please notice:

That list is not comprised exclusively of the sort of “fun” things we Christians have a reputation for frowning upon! Idolatry and sorcery are on that list. So are jealousy, envy, anger, quarrels, unnecessary disagreements and factions. Paul's understanding of the “flesh” does not simply orbit around anything that might cause us to have a fleeting moment of pleasure...although some of those things are on that list. Living at the time in which we live, perhaps the most helpful word we can insert into this conversation—especially when Paul includes on those lists such items as “drunkenness and carousing”—perhaps the most useful word we can insert here is a word our contemporaries are bound to grasp, namely the word “addiction”. As most of us realize, addictions generally begin innocently enough: often promising us freedom and pleasure. Generally they end by enslaving us: pretty much guaranteeing that we will have no time left over for authentic lives of love, since we will be preoccupied with scoring our next fix, of whatever activity or substance to which we have become enthralled. While Paul's reputation as the ultimate party-pooper may not be entirely undeserved, let's be fair to him and acknowledge that many of the concerns he names here, are concerns we have no choice but to share: because we have all seen the damage done when a life of self-indulgence imprisons us or someone we love. That having been said.

That having been said...the items on those lists that I have so far held in reserve, are the ones that involve human sexuality: which is as much of a concern for Paul as any of the others. I have held them in reserve, so far, because I believe them to be worthy of further reflection, in part because Christian teaching—or so I believe—has tended to be quite imbalanced...and part of the sexual revolution through which we have all lived over the past half-century, is a predictable reaction to that imbalance.

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Here's the thing. There is, I believe, a qualitative difference between sexuality, and all of the other items on Paul's list. Had alcohol never been discovered, I very much doubt that anything essential to the identity of the human race would be terribly different from what it presently is. Sex is different. That which makes us sexual creatures comes from within us; it's not a substance that is poured into us. Far from being external to our identity, it is something we discover as we come of age, something that lies within us, a potentiality ready to explode into fullness when those hormones begin to flood through us at the first sign of adolescence. Making it all even more complex, is the extent to which that explosion brings with it two further realities: on the one hand, the connection between our sex-drive and romantic feelings, on the other hand, our sense of self-worth as embodied creatures who yearn to be valued and cherished for the persons we are in the bodies we inhabit. All of that...all of that makes us terribly vulnerable when it comes to issues around human sexuality: which explains why we never get it quite right. One generation's excessive prudery gives way to the next generation's excessive exhibitionism. One generation's tendency to demonize sexuality, gives way to the next generation's blindness to the way in which the sexual impulse, unchecked, can prove to be the most cruel and unloving of idols. And knowing...knowing full well that we don't ever get it fully right...and knowing...knowing that I am certainly not going to get it all right this morning, permit me to conclude with just a handful of bullet-points, all of which could be unpacked at greater length.

First bullet-point. I wish, oh how dearly I wish, that all Christian conversations about sexuality, would recall the undeniable fact (a fact for which I am profoundly grateful) that the *Song of Songs* is part of our scriptures. The *Song of Songs*: the Bible's uninhibited celebration of sexuality. Knowing full well that the tradition has tended to treat the *Song of Songs* as a mystical book, a book that celebrates God's passionate love for the human soul, and human soul's passionate yearning after God: none of that changes, in the least, my conviction that the *Song of Songs* serves as a crucial reminder that eros—erotic love, romantic love—is not the enemy but is, in fact, a powerful hint of just how passionate God's love for us really and truly is. In short, it's a book that can help us to remember that the Christian concern is with the misuse of our sexuality, not with the actuality of our sexuality.

Second bullet-point. Christianity is a religion in which shame should play no role whatsoever. Guilt, on the other hand, does have a place: the difference being that guilt reveals things I have done that I ought to regret and seek to put right (recall that a pretty good working definition of a socio-path is someone who never experiences

guilt!)...whereas shame tells me that I am bad, that I am worthless, that I am not worthy of love. If you want a quick and dirty way of remembering the difference, think of how Jesus addresses the women taken in adultery: he refuses to condemn her, but he does send her away appealing to her to “sin no more”. At the heart of the Gospel is the conviction that we are loved by God, and that nothing we can do will ever be able to place us outside the bounds of that love. Especially when dealing with young people, when they come to the realization that they have made a sexual mistake, whatever correction they may need to be offered, needs to come enfolded with a huge helping of compassion, acceptance and love, not condemnation and never shaming.

Final bullet-point. This section of Romans—and the comparable sections of all of Paul’s letters—always need to be read in the context of their place within those letters, namely the place in which Paul urges us to respond to the Gospel he will have proclaimed earlier in the letter. Paul’s core message is the Gospel: the hard to fathom news (the seemingly improbable news) of Christ’s advent, Christ’s coming, not to an ideal world, but into the midst of a world of brokenness and sin. The fact that our response to that glorious news will always fall short of the mark...the fact that we will always need to be on the receiving end of Christ’s radical acceptance and the Spirit’s unending stream of healing love...does not negate the good news, which can never be negated because the good news of the Gospel is grounded in the good news of who God really and truly is. And yes: in this broken world, few things are as badly broken as our fragile sexual identities as men and women. And yet: in this broken world, few things point as clearly to God’s love for us, than those same fragile sexual identities, as men and women created in God’s image, male and female God created us.

May that image shine brightly in this place! And may God’s love be made known generously and courageously in this place! Through Christ! Amen.