Living "in the Spirit" in the Flesh

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Flesh; Spirit / Romans 8:1–11

› Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.

It's always a thrill to see someone famous in the flesh. Frankly right now it would be a thrill to see anyone in the flesh besides those in our homes. Right now it would a thrill to see you in the flesh. And when I can, tears will be shed because you are back! You hear your favorite musician any time on your iPod or see him/her in videos, but it's way more exciting to see him/her in the flesh—and so much better if it's not just seeing him on stage from the cheap seats but happening to bump right into him on a busy street corner. My parents tell me that when I was kid we were eating lunch in Milwaukee and Green Bay Packers star Ray Nitschke came up to them and said that they well-behaved kids. Now i don't remember this and they didn't even get me his autograph.

You can see your famous actors on TV, Sports Stars in replays of games, but if you saw any of your favorites, maybe it's Aaron Rodgers, Christian Yelich or Gianiss in the flesh, then you've got a story to share. Always better in the flesh. We even think that today. Maybe as you watch me or listen to me, you are thinking, worship is better in the flesh in the pew. Always better in the flesh.

Except, of course, for what God's Word says about the flesh. "The flesh" is a term for our sinful nature, as St. Paul uses it over and over again in our text today, and it's bad. Living "in the flesh" means living a life that hates God and loves sin. Not good! Living "in the Spirit," on the other hand, we know is God's way. It even sounds holy.

There is a giant problem though. We all live in the flesh. We've got flesh, bodies. Go ahead squeeze yourself, flesh and bone. We live in this material flesh-and-blood world. Yeah, that's the real world God created. And being purely spiritual is really ignoring life as it is. Doesn't God want us to live real lives in this real world, doing physical, tangible things—in the flesh? Now at this time we do it at a distance!

So the question for you this morning, "Is there some way we can live 'in the spirit' in the flesh?"

We all live in the flesh, of course, but…Living "in the flesh" is completely contrary to living "in the Spirit." Living "in the flesh" means setting our minds on the things of the flesh, not of the Spirit.

That means we live self-centered lives. The Spirit would have us think of others, for the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control for and with others. I know I am learning this lesson on patience and so are you. We are going to God seeking his peace for us and others.

But the thing is we often live "in the flesh" thinking of what is going to benefit me. We see ourselves always as number one. Our political leaders and health experts are asking us to sacrifice for the other. This is hard to do. Where are your minds at right now? Where will the income come from so that I can continue to feed my family? Why can't I socialize? Why can't I have friends over? It's all about me. Not to mention as I mentioned last week the hoarding of necessities.

This past week I saw a Facebook post that said: "You're not stuck at home. You are safe at home. One word can change your attitude and one cough can change your life…or someone else's." This cannot be about you!

Setting our minds on the things of the flesh also means chasing after all kinds of immorality. My fear for you is that as you are social distancing yourself and isolating is that you will be led into immorality…you might be led into pornography or other internet addictions. Because you are isolated, your mental health might become ill and I also fear that you will try to cope with unhealthy actions with alcohol.

This living "in the flesh" is the very opposite of pleasing God, as the Spirit would have us do.

It is actually hostility to God, because it means having another god—self—ahead of the true God.

Since God would have us love him and love our neighbor, serving our own flesh makes it impossible for us to please him.

Thus while living in the Spirit is life, living "in the flesh" is a dead end. Sin can control a person's life. Satan's going to be working hard right now to control your life. Over this period of time we could and can become obsessed with satisfying our own wants and not just our needs. When our life is controlled by sinful self, it results in spiritual death, which ends in eternal death.

So, then, is God telling us that life in the flesh is all evil, that as long as we're living as flesh-and-blood people we can never be pleasing to him? Is he saying we ought to escape these bodies for something only spiritual? NO! Living "in the flesh" is completely contrary to living "in the Spirit."

But the Son of God coming in the flesh set us free to live "in the Spirit." The Father sent his Son into the world as a real flesh-and-blood human for us real flesh-and-blood humans. He sent the Holy Spirit to the Virgin Mary and conceived in her God's Son. Jesus is fully human and also fully God. This past Wednesday was March 25 which is 9 months before Christmas. It is the day that we remember when the Angel Gabriel came to the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and conceived in her womb Jesus Christ.

This shows how God emphatically God intends for us to be flesh and blood, to be his and serve him in both body and Spirit. Life is to be lived in the flesh.

As a real flesh-and-blood human being, Jesus then lived, died, and rose for you! Jesus lived the life God calls all of us to live. He kept God's Law perfectly. And because he is fully human, his keeping of God's Law fulfilled the Law for us.

Finally, Jesus went to the cross and there suffered and died, atoning for our sins. On the third day he rose from the grave. He overcame death for us. Jesus is our Savior. He overcame death for you. Jesus is your Savior.

Now, when we are baptized into this death and resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts!

With the Spirit living in us, even though we still live in the flesh (real live bodied in a real, physical world), we are no longer living "in the flesh" (that is, as people ruled by the sinful flesh). The Holy Spirit living in us sets us free to live as God's children.

Therefore you and I can live "in the Spirit" in the flesh even as we are separated and isolated. You and I know that we live in the flesh and in this real, physical world fed by the Holy Spirit through His Word and Sacraments.

These aren't just something spiritual. The human, flesh-and-body Jesus is really with us in this physical world—though invisibly—every time his Word is preached or read…even in your homes. Jesus is with you even there! Jesus is with you now physically, but invisibly.

In the Word and the Sacraments, Christ sustains us for living in this world, in the flesh, and the Holy Spirit leads us to live the way the Lord wants, teaching us as we study the Scriptures. The Spirit sets our minds on his things.

Since the Spirit sets our minds on His things, we do please God by helping and serving others.

When the Spirit is in control of our lives, we do live for others, not just for ourselves. We are concerned about our fellow human beings—their real, physical, in-the-flesh, as well as spiritual, needs.

These past two weeks more so then ever have we become concerned with our neighbors physical needs. I'm sure by now we all know someone who has been affected by layoff, money

shortage, or even the virus itself. Dear Church, this isn't about me, it's not about you. It's about our neighbor. It's about seeking to maintain their health in this physical life. Those times that we ask, what about needs…think about those who have more desperate needs. Think about our residents in the nursing homes that don't have much social contact…just their care team. Think about how you can serve them from afar.

There is so much that you can do from afar as you live in your flesh in the spirit to serve your neighbors. Be creative, send a card.

We are no longer slaves to immoralities but set our minds on the things of the Spirit. Instead of finding yourself becoming slaves pornography or other internet addictions, watch the multitude of worship services. Or perhaps pick up a new hobby, play a game with your family, do a puzzle, take a walk. There are many healthy things you can be doing right now!

We have real life now and forever, even if it doesn't seem real enough. Even though, because of our sin, our flesh-and-blood bodies will die, when Christ returns he will raise those very same bodies. We see some of this in the flashiness of the reading from Ezekiel as Ezekiel has the vision of dry bones and in the Gospel from John where Jesus raises Lazarus in his body from the dead.

Yes, when we meet our graves, we won't stay there for eternity…you and I, the believers, will live in the flesh again. Christ will resurrect us. On that day, we won't have to worry about Covid-19, influenza, or even the common cold…there will no such thing as social-distancing, quarantines, mandates, orders, bans, etc. On that day, you and I will be able to live in complete freedom from the pains and torments of this life. And we pray for that day to come…but we also pray for that day to come when can gather together in the flesh to hear and receive the tangible gifts of God…the Body and Blood of Jesus.

But in the meantime, you are baptized into the death of Christ's flesh…and you have been raised with him so yes, we live in His Spirit, even as we live in the flesh.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

› Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.