

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God.

I can't help but to hear centuries of theologians in our epistle reading this morning who took Paul's words to mean that our bodies are bad. When he says, "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." At first take, it reads as a dichotomy. The body is bad and leads to death, and the Spirit is good and leads to life, or our physical bodies are at war with the divinity that is in us.

But whenever we read scripture as black and white absolutes or in a binary, we're probably misreading it and missing out on the depth that is really there. So, let's take a deeper look, and what better place to start than with creation? In our first creation narrative, God says, "Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness." And God blessed them and called them good. From the very beginning, God is not a singular I, but a plural we. In other words, God is a relationship.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says, "God is dynamic, a verb rather than a static name. God is interbeing itself, and never an isolated deity that can be captured by our mind." And as early as the third and fourth centuries, Christians started naming this dynamic being that is God as the Trinity or God as three relationships: God the Father, the Creator, who spoke from the void and doesn't have a form, but just is, God the Son, who has a form and a physical body, and God the Holy Spirit, who is the living and loving energy generated between these two.

And rather than a hierarchy of Father, Son, and Spirit, these three relationships are better understood as circular, each perfectly giving to and receiving from the other, three intimate partners equally outpouring themselves. And through their relationship, they're sharing and creating shalom, wholeness, unity, union. And this is the image that humans were created in. We also are not a static identity, but dynamic, always changing, developing, and maturing throughout our lives.

And like Jesus, we have been given a physical form and we have been enlivened by the Holy Spirit. And we are in relationship with everything in creation. NASA explains this interconnectedness both scientifically and poetically when they say, "Though the billions of people on earth may come from different areas, we share a common heritage: we are all made of stardust. From the carbon in our DNA to the calcium in our bones, nearly all of the elements in our bodies were forged in the fiery hearts and death throes of stars."

So, from the atoms in our bodies to the dust in stars, we are intricately connected. We're not separate from one another or anything in creation, but we are also not the same. Or as Father Rohr says of the Trinity, we are not one, but not two either. So going back to our reading from the Apostle Paul when he says, "If you live according to the flesh, you will die," he isn't pitting the body against the Spirit, making the body bad and the Spirit good, because everything is in relationship with one another, including our bodies and our Spirits.

And our bodies are in relationship with the whole interconnected universe, making them part of the inpouring and outpouring of God. So, to pause here for just a moment, I wonder how you perceive your body, whether through the church's teachings or through our culture or our history, I would be surprised if anyone in this room didn't have some sort of conflict with being in a physical form. We can feel shame over what our bodies look like, frustration or grief when our bodies become weak or broken, or guilt at our body's natural responses.

But our bodies are not the enemy. They're created in God's image, and they are good. And we're here to experience the world through having a physical form, which involves honoring and caring for the unique vessel we each have been given, and following Jesus' example in letting our embodied experience lead us into deeper relationship with the formlessness of God. So, I invite you to consider how can you be kinder and more compassionate towards your body even today?

How can you nurture a more loving relationship with this gift that God has given you?

Which leads me to what Paul was really getting at in his teaching when he says, "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." In biblical Greek, the word for flesh means our animal nature apart from the Spirits' influence. Our animal nature is a name for our base instincts and cravings. Another word for it is the reptilian brain, which helps us to literally stay alive. It's the primitive drive related to thirst, hunger, sexuality, and territoriality.

But if we live out of our reptilian brains only, we will constantly be on alert for threats making us anxious and defensive, or we will act on every impulse or desire without considering our longer-term health, or we will prioritize our own needs over the well-being of others. But when we pair the reptilian brain with the Spirit, we can live from a higher consciousness. Where instead of just reacting, we can see the situation clearly, apply wisdom and respond accordingly.

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, said, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." And in surviving the horrors of the Holocaust, Frankl knew firsthand what it means for people to live out of their animal nature and how this leads to people being dehumanized and treated like animals. Frankl also knew that no one could take away his power to act from a higher consciousness and to choose his own response.

And that meant that even in the horrors he was facing, he had the agency to personally grow and to have inner freedom. So, here's another translation of our reading from Paul. If we live according to our animal nature and reptilian brain, we will be ruled by our fear, anxiety, impulses, and cravings, which will lead us to dehumanize ourselves and the people around us.

But if we live by the Spirit allowing us to put space between our instinctual drive and our response, we can exercise our own agency and choose a higher consciousness which will lead to our growth and our freedom. So, I invite you today to notice when your reptilian brain becomes activated, when you notice that instinctual drive for survival. And instead of immediately reacting, take a breath and a pause. Empower yourself to make your own Spirit-led decision that shows kindness and compassion towards every body, including your own.

And may this pause help each one of us to grow in intimacy with God's Spirit, setting us free to see everything in creation as part of the dynamic relationship that is God. And may we treat it all as sacred from the atoms in our bodies to the dust in the stars. Amen.