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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fifth Sunday in Lent
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Lectionary Year A: Romans 8:6-11

I'll never forget the first time I saw a bald eagle do a less-than-dignified thing. Here was the most noble symbol of our country doing a most un-noble thing...scavenging. The carcass of a dead animal lay on the side of a highway, and here was this bald eagle picking at it like a common crow! "What's next?", I thought, "the President of the United States selling shoes door-to-door?"

Let's hope none of us ever lives to see that...

To be quite honest, I experienced a momentary loss of respect for the bald eagle. Before they were a common sight, rare sightings of them usually found them in a suitably majestic posture -- either perched high atop a tree or gliding with wings outstretched. But scavenging? Never. The mighty bald eagle had a reputation to uphold, so I thought.

But my impression of the bald eagle was probably shaped more by The Muppet Show than by reality. Some of you may remember Sam the Eagle from the Muppets, whose stiff persona almost always demanded that everything on the show be suitably dignified. Surely, Sam would've never lowered himself to any behavior that was beneath his sense of dignity. So, naturally, I assumed that Sam the Eagle was at least a partially accurate representation of a bald eagle in the wild.

Well, I was wrong about that!

I suppose that it would be impossible for our friends in the U.S. Fish and Wild-

life Service to manage the bald eagle population in such a way that prevented our nation's symbol from pursuing its natural, undignified instincts. And yet, if a bald eagle scavenges once in a while, think about it this way -- at least we didn't end up with a turkey!

In some ways, we're similar to creatures of the wild like the bald eagle. No matter how majestic and dignified we're purported to be, we still can be found doing less-than-majestic and less-than-dignified things. We have an entire set of natural instincts, which lead us to seek pleasure for the sake of pleasure-seeking and to indulge in excess for the sake of filling some void inside that can never be filled. Worse yet, where the bald eagle pursues its indignities for survival, we more often than not don't. So we just do these things, as I said, for the sake of doing them.

Few known figures from early Christianity addressed this problem as extensively as the apostle Paul. You'll notice that he uses phrases like "of the flesh" and "of the Spirit," and, to some extent at least, we can understand what he's talking about. There are the desires and wants for the more base and carnal things in life which are "of the flesh," and then there is the righteousness and holiness that only God can give us which is "of the Spirit." It often seems as if Paul associates being "of the flesh" with a base and almost subhuman existence; thus, when you behave in such a way, you are no more noble than an animal scavenging off of a carcass.

And the drawbacks and benefits to one's self would be comparable, as well. Paul writes: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:6). Note the association between flesh and

death. Here, flesh is, in a sense, no different than the carcass on the side of the road from which scavengers pick. We, too, can "pick" from "carcasses" of sin and dissolute living and receive little more than a momentary satisfaction...certainly not the life our Lord wants for us!

But our perspective might be a bit one-sided, as we can look at words like "of the flesh" and pretty easily figure out what they mean -- sex, pleasure, desire, self-indulgence, drugs, drinking, and so on -- and, by all means, not in moderation! On the other hand, what, beyond some unachievable standard of moral purity, is there for us to exemplify things "of the Spirit"? It just seems so nebulous, vague, and un-definable. This is due to the fact that we're dealing less with a set of behaviors than we are a state of being. Paul puts it this way:

"But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Romans 8:9-10).

So I can't simply give you a list of things to do in order to be "of the Spirit." That would be akin to turning righteousness into a set of good works, and that matter was supposed to have been settled during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. It might be more helpful to say that the transformation you experience through Jesus Christ is what makes you "of the Spirit." The only thing that you "do" in this case is invite Christ into your heart and mind. Remember that Paul says, "But if Christ is in you..." (Romans 9:10a, emphasis mine). Having Christ in you is, indeed, being "of the Spirit," and your good works follow rather than precede your transformation.

Again, though, we still seem to be in a rather abstract realm, with all this talk of being "in Christ" and "of the Spirit" and "transformed." So what concrete things do we have to make it real? Is there anything tangible to convey or illustrate how we become who we are?

I can think of one thing -- water.

The season of Lent, in many ways, carries us back to the gift of Baptism, where we were made children of God by water and God's promise. So, during this season, we look more deeply into our relationship with God and at where it all started. We do so because we often confuse our fleshly wants with our needs for Christ, and as we approach the day on which we remember God's greatest gift to us -- the day Jesus died on the cross for our sin -- we remember that Christ is, indeed, in us. He is in us by means of an unbreakable bond that began and continues in Holy Baptism.

In Baptism, Christ is in us and we are in Christ. Through this gift of water and God's promise, we are "of the Spirit" and the only thing we need to "do" in order to be righteous people is remember who we belong to...perhaps not as easy to comprehend as a list of dos and don'ts, but if Christianity didn't make you think once in a while, what fun would it be?

But when we recognize that we belong to God, we recognize, too, that God guides us with his Spirit -- so we really aren't left to our own devices, after all. And, as Paul reminds us, that Spirit is in us, too! We read from our text -- "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" (Romans 8:11).

Knowing what you know at this point, therefore, it shouldn't be too difficult to figure out what God would have you doing and not doing. Let's leave it at that and say, too, that God has given us the ability to do more than scavenge at the remains of fleshly pleasures. It may, indeed, be more disappointing to see a human live solely "of the flesh" than to see a bald eagle picking at the flesh of a carcass...because our God created us to do and to be better than that! You see, death and decaying flesh have no hold over us when met with the life and Spirit of Christ...whose death-conquering power claims, renews, and resurrects us every day.

That's what is in you.

Thanks be to God! Amen.