

St. John's Lutheran Church
March 9, 2008

"The Sprit of God Dwells in You"
Romans 8:6-11

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

What comes to mind for you when you think of a tug-o-war? My mind always goes back to the fall of 1968. I was a freshman at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. And I participated in a week of freshman orientation before classes began. Some things never change. I know that some of St. John's students who are freshmen in college this year did the same thing this past fall. The goal of freshman orientation week is to help freshmen get to know each other, to help freshmen get to know some upper classmen, and to start the school year with some fun.

When I think of a tug-o-war my mind always goes back to freshman orientation week at Augustana the fall of 1968. One of the activities of the week was a tug-o-war. The tug-o-war pitted the freshman class against the upper classmen. There was a large trough of mud that separated the two teams. The decisive factor on the two teams, however, was that the Augie football team was also on campus early to get ready for the football season. And the upperclassman tug-o-war team invited the football team to come out and pull on their side.

Some of the guys in our freshman class were both competitive and creative. There were a couple of tall trees near the back of our line. And some of our guys, unbeknownst to the upperclassmen, tied the end of our rope around a couple of solid trees. What great fun it was for us little guys to watch those big upperclassmen pull with all their might, while we pretended to pull with our tail tied securely to a tree rooted deeply in the ground. The victory in that tug-o-war was guaranteed.

What comes to mind for you when you think of a tug-o-war? If you were to ask the Bible that question, the answer would clearly be the tug-o-war that goes on inside of every believer in Christ. It is the tug-o-war between the mind of the flesh and the mind of Christ. It is a tug-o-war that goes on also inside of you, dear friend in Christ.

It is important to know the two teams who oppose each other in this tug-o-war inside of you. On the one side there is the mind of the flesh. When we think of our flesh we are used to thinking about our skin, or perhaps the meat on our bones. Our flesh is that which we can see and touch and which makes up the outer casing of our bodies.

But such is not what the Apostle Paul means when he speaks of the mind of the flesh. For Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans, there is a totally different meaning to the word flesh. For Paul, the word flesh means that within every human being out of which every desire rises which is against God's will. From Paul's point of view there is inside of us all a source from which rises every evil or selfish desire. And that source of all evil and selfishness inside each and every one of us is termed our "flesh". It requires getting used to this kind of thinking. Your flesh, according to Paul, has nothing at all to do with your skin or the meat on your bones.

So, this "mind of the flesh" is one of the teams who pulls on the rope in the tug-o-war that goes on inside of you. The other team pulling on the rope inside of you is easier to understand and identify. It is the mind of the Spirit. And when Paul speaks of this Spirit, of course, he is speaking of the Spirit of God, or the Spirit of Christ. This is the Spirit of Jesus himself, who was crucified as consequence of the sin of all humankind, raised from the dead on the first Easter, ascended into heaven forty days later, and ten days later sent that Spirit into the disciples to be the power by which they would believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This same Spirit of Christ continues to be distributed by Christ throughout the Church in each and every generation.

Two chapters earlier in Romans Paul declares that it is in Holy Baptism that the baptized is brought into this Spirit of Christ. Or, to say it another way, it is in Holy Baptism that the Spirit of Christ is brought into the baptized. The Spirit of Christ, then, or the mind of Christ, or the mind of the Spirit has been introduced into you in your baptism. It is not natural to you. It is a foreign mind within you. And it is opposed to that mind which resides in you by nature.

And the mind that resides in you by nature, again, is the mind of the flesh. And it is these two opposing forces that stage a tug-o-war inside of you each and every day throughout your life on this earth. It is the tug-o-war that Paul is describing when he says things on our Second Reading for this morning like, "You are not in

the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” There is a tug-o-war going on inside of you.

There is much evidence within us and around us of this tug-o-war with which we are all so familiar. The mind of the flesh is apparent in any two-year-old who has as one of the first words in his or her vocabulary, “mine”. Even a two-year-old is able to experience what it means when we say that there is the mind of the flesh within us all whose primary concern is to focus on the self.

And, again, the mind of the Spirit is apparent in any of us when we find ourselves biting our tongues to keep from saying to another that which would be harmful or hurtful. Yes, the mind of the flesh is surely there in that we have the thought to be hurtful or harmful in the first place. But the mind of the Spirit is there in that we have the wisdom to bite our tongues.

As long as we live on this earth, this tug-o-war will continue within us. The final victory of the mind of the Spirit does not come until we arrive in glory in heaven. Until then we continue to respond to God's call to set our minds on the Spirit in opposition to the mind of the flesh.

It is our privilege at St. John's Church to celebrate new members joining our congregation this morning at the 10:45 service. To welcome them into our congregation, we observe the rite of Affirmation of Baptism. In the midst of that welcoming rite the persons joining our congregation are asked to renounce the forces of evil three different times. In so doing they are giving witness to that which we all do every hour of every day of our earthly lives. Renouncing the mind of the flesh.

Immediately following the members of St. John's Church are invited to join with these Christians who are joining with us in confessing Christian faith – that we believe in God the Father, who has created us, in God the Son, Christ, Jesus, who has died for all our sin, and in God the Holy Spirit, as the power by which we live and believe. And in so doing we give public testimony to the mind of the Spirit living within us and among us as we strive even this day to live our lives by faith in the God who has loved us and called us into relationship with him. Amen.