

## Swimming Against the Current

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday

Sermon Text: Romans 8:1-11



*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. <sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit*

*set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. <sup>9</sup> You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.*

“If you want to go to the source of the spring, you have to swim against the current.” This is an old Chinese proverb. But whoever swims against the current, must first know that there is a spring at the end of the current because otherwise, it is much easier to just let yourself be carried away by the water. Even if the flowing water goes into the abyss. In our sermon text today, it also talks about swimming against the current. Paul actually speaks of two big worlds that are the exact opposite of each other: the flesh and the Spirit. And there couldn't be a greater contradiction. Paul summarizes: “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God!” Can we do that? Can we stand up for God against our feelings and secret desires? Can we uphold the things of God even when it becomes difficult and we are opposed? At first, the 11 disciples of Jesus were not such people that looked as though they could swim against the current. They were all somewhat unsuccessful people. When the going got tough, they all ran away. And after all of that, they stood on the Mount of Olives with Jesus then He told them how to proceed and above all, He would tell them how to get to the source of Life even if it was going against the current. Jesus said: “Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). Did Jesus believe in the disciples when He said that? If yes, why? Furthermore, why are these unsuccessful people given such an incredible task and assignment? Each one of those disciples standing there on the mountain with Jesus must have caught their breath, each one of them must have looked to their neighbor and thought: “Who, me?... go into all the world?... that can't be?” Perhaps each one inwardly thought of an excuse already. “I'm too old!” “I can't talk!” “I always get seasick when I'm traveling!” etc.... And yet, they were meant to do this. Just like you are meant to do it too. You should be a witness and messenger of the Gospel! But the impossibility of the task is obvious. “Me, how is that?” And that's

how we get to the miracle of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works with the weak disciples in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit also works with us who are weak today. Today, we celebrate the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the Holy Spirit not only as tradition-conscious people who just say to each other, "Happy Pentecost!" No, we celebrate the fact that God's Spirit is still with us today and works in us! On this day, we talk about how such people like the 11 disciples of Jesus, people like us, can live by the Holy Spirit today! We also talk about the fact that we weak human beings can manage to swim against the current because we know about the spring at the end of the current.

But in normal everyday life, it seems to us more like we want to reheat old soup. What does our life look like with the Holy Spirit? I see this when I talk with my non-Christian neighbors. We are people with joy and suffering, hopes and disappointments. We must all navigate through the life that we've been given. When I talk with my neighbors, they naturally want to know what is different, or rather, what is going to be different! Yes, as a Christian, some things have changed. But not everything. I still struggle with temptation, I am still scared, I will still get sick. I have the same normal needs as every other person. Your friend on the other side of your garden fence has these problems too. Maybe then he'll get the idea that support is needed in life. He, who is a very decent person, doesn't need this support and can get by without any help. He can especially do without the Holy Spirit. So your conversation with your neighbor ends something like this: "I don't need your Gospel. I can get by without it. But the others need it! Those who can't cope with life. But I don't need something like that. I can manage quite well on my own!"

In our sermon text, Paul puts these two things, flesh and Spirit, against one another. By this, he doesn't mean that the Christian on the one side of the fence is of the Spirit and the non-Christian on the other side is of the flesh. We won't dispute here that non-Christians can also be good people. The only dispute is that people of the flesh can please God. In other words, the Christian as well as the non-Christian are of the flesh and as such, are unjust before God because of their life and their way of life and so can't please God. The worst thing about people is not that we have failures. The worst thing is not that we are weak sinners. The worst thing is that we want to live without God. The worst thing is that we don't know about the source of life and therefore just let ourselves be carried away by the world and our feelings. And so, in our little section from Romans, Paul begins to talk about how the new reality of a Christian can look. Life according to the Law doesn't work because the Law is weakened by the flesh. Something else comes along... We must live according to the Spirit. "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit." So the disciples on the mountain, like us, are equipped with spiritual rockets with which we can fly far above the normal people, something like spiritual supermen. Paul's words seem to contradict this. Just a few lines before, Paul writes, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). Paul, like the first disciples, like us, speaks more about a constant struggle between the old and the new man. This fight occurs in the middle of our lives. What we need in this fight is not a corrective measure nor a spiritual rocket in our pack to catapult us over the things of the flesh in an emergency. No, the miracle of the Holy Spirit happens entirely differently. The miracle of the Holy Spirit is the miracle that God is with and in us. Jesus showed that once and for all by becoming human like we are. He overcame sin, death, and the devil for us as well. The Lord Jesus Christ did everything that we can't do. He has the spiritual power that we don't have. He kept the Commandments that we can't keep. He defeated Satan on the cross, whom we can't defeat. He also defeated death on the cross which we can't defeat. And that is exactly what the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit is definitely not comparable to our human spirit. Yet miracle of miracles, He comes to us, even lives within us. The

Holy Spirit establishes and creates and builds the Church despite all human weakness. And then it happens and it's hard to believe that we are allowed to experience the Holy Spirit so that, at Pentecost, the work of the Holy Spirit among people becomes visible and tangible – that people come to faith... that people, with the power of God and with faith in their hearts, can establish churches and, against all human imagination, can even overcome the gates of Satan. Our missionary work can only be about this Holy Spirit being at work. There is only one thing that is needed: asking the Holy Spirit that God's kingdom may also come among us!

When we pray like that, we want to live completely out of God – freed from sin, death, and the devil. This comes from the work of Christ and comes to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. When we were baptized, then God adopted us as His children. In God's eyes, the past, present, or future no longer count. The sins and weaknesses of our lives do not count. Only the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ counts. God already sees us as His little children. Only in this way can Paul speak of the fact that we are already spiritual people, that we are already saved, even in the midst of so many hardships and also in the midst of the fight against sin. From the eternal counsel of God, our whole life is founded on the Holy Spirit. This new birth through the Holy Spirit doesn't mean that we must do everything right as of right now. Then everyone can say... Bravo, here is a good man, a truly religious man, a holy man! Such so-called holy people don't move us forward. No, rather than our own light, we let the light of Christ shine brightly - because Jesus is the final and perfect revelation of God. He is also the light that shines brightly today! Jesus says: "I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Light is the nature of our Lord Jesus. His Light naturally fights against the darkness. First against the darkness in ourselves but also against the darkness in the world. Like our Lord fought against Satan, so also will Christ's body, the Church, engage in such a fight and therefore must constantly swim against the current.

The final battle will be when our bodies die. With that, our existence seems to be extinguished. But the Holy Spirit, Paul says, remains, and He will ultimately even raise our mortal bodies, which must die, back to life again. The one who swims against the current to reach the spring, must know the destination to which he swims. Jesus believed that His disciples could know about this destination. He had one reason to believe in His disciples. He had one reason to believe in the whole Church. And that is that God Himself is at work. God Himself sent His Spirit! God Himself sent us to go into the world and to spread His Word. And so we have every reason to believe that we too can swim against wickedness and hopelessness by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.