

One of the first books I read in seminary was Hans Kung's massive tome, *The Church*. I don't know if any of you have ever tackled a book by Kung, but as I recall, I made my way through it at the rate of about five pages per hour. The central portion of Kung's book was a reflection on the confession from the Nicene Creed that "The church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."

Kung took on the first assertion – that the church is one – and wrote about 50 or 60 pages of reasons why it is impossible to view the church as unified. It took a long time, but eventually I worked my way through his carefully crafted arguments, and when I had finished the section he had utterly convinced me.

Then, he made a 180-degree turn to say that in spite of all of those reasons, the church really is one. Another 50 pages, another night of reading into the wee hours, but when I had finished the section, I was in total agreement with Kung: the church is one.

In the three sections that followed, Kung took me on a repeat ride through the rest of the phrase: the church is *not* holy, but really the church *is* holy; the church is *not* catholic, but actually it *is*; the church is *not* apostolic, however it truly *is* apostolic. I ended up rather in awe of Kung's intellect, but, truth be told, I had the uneasy suspicion that if he had a mind to do so, he could write 50 pages and convince me that I was a zebra.

Well, all of that is to say that I come away from the Letter of Paul to the Romans with something of the same feelings. The epistle to the Romans is a stunning theological treatise, and Paul is a brilliant human being. It is with some fear and trepidation – and some sense of inadequacy – that I venture into the passage we heard a few moments ago.

I suppose the first thing to say is that some of what Paul is saying strikes me as difficult. I'll pause while you chuckle. That's a "master of the obvious" statement if ever there were one. It took me three tries just to get through this morning's Epistle without going cross-eyed. But here's what makes it difficult for me: The flesh/spirit dualism of this passage is, I think, ripe for some misinterpretation.

It would be understandable to see how a reader could reach the conclusion that the physical world is evil, and to be sure, some expressions of Christian theology have suggested exactly that over the centuries. Human intimacy, material possessions,

recreational pursuits and more – all of these “fleshly” activities are believed to detract from our proper spiritual existences.

To view this text in isolation, however, is to forget that the opening chapter in Genesis has a satisfied God declaring that creation is good. Not only is *Spirit* good, as Genesis sees it: *flesh* is good. All of it's good. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it in his excellent book about the roots of violence and hatred in our world, ***Not in God's Name***, this kind of dualism is simply inconsistent with Genesis' understanding – and it's inconsistent with that of the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole.

We also have to look at this passage in the context of what *Jesus* has to say. Jesus was no proponent of a stark asceticism. His behavior marked a clear departure from the ways of John the Baptizer, whom scholars have always speculated may have been an ascetic. While Jesus did indeed fast and withdraw for extended times of prayer, he also feasted and celebrated. He lived life – out in the streets, among the people, not hermetically sealed off from them. One of the charges leveled against him by religious authorities was that he and his disciples were excessive in their eating and drinking.

So, this passage needs to be viewed in the larger context of scripture lest we take Paul's words to excess in denouncing our “fleshly” world. We are, after all, complex beings. There is in each of us a physical dimension and a spiritual dimension, but there is also an intellectual component. Life is at once communal and solitary. So, part of maintaining health in life, it seems to me, lies in recognizing and balancing these varied facets of our existence.

Paul tends not to be a delicate man, but if it is possible to see some subtlety within Paul's words, I would suggest we do not need to understand them as projecting the kind of radical dualism Rabbi Sacks and other eminent scholars reject. What I mean to say is that part of the flow of Paul's reasoning is a coming together of the flesh and spirit. He writes about God's great initiative, *sending his own Son*, as Paul puts it, *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, and to deal with sin, he actually *became* flesh. I take this to suggest that instead of God condemning sin from beyond the world, God sent a Son *into* the world to conquer sin from *within* the flesh.

What I am struggling to reach is an understanding of spirit that uplifts rather than rejects flesh. Take the matter of human intimacy. If we want to make the case that it is not inherently wicked, we need to acknowledge that it is equally true that our culture has come to view it as only a physical matter – and that is a false dichotomy. I mean, is there

not a *spiritual* dimension to intimacy?

Some years ago, I heard a sermon by a preacher who was speaking to a group of teenagers. Rather than making the case you might expect from such a preacher for sexual abstinence, he began by recognizing that we are beings who have a sexual attraction imbedded in us. Yes, we are going to be attracted to others, but that is not the final word on the matter. His advice was for these young people to get to know the *person* for whom they have this physical attraction. What does this other *person* like to do? What are his or her interests and activities? Who are the members of her or his family? Who loves them and whom do they love? What are this other person's innermost hopes and dreams? If you get to know – really get to know – another *person*, he or she will always be a *person* to you; you will never be able to reduce them to some object that exists only for your sexual satisfaction.

In a thousand other ways, I think Paul is saying that while we are human, we are more than human: *You are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.* We are dust, and to dust we shall return, but we have been made *more* than dust by the God who has created us, claimed us, and raised us up by placing a portion of the Spirit within each and every one of us.

Now, breathe deeply. See? I said that in far less than 50 pages...or minutes!