

## Romans 8:9-11 “Living in the Spirit”

This is the last Sunday in our “Moving Toward Life in the Spirit” series. During these past few weeks, we’ve been talking about what it means to move away from being just part of a crowd who is *interested* in Jesus, to becoming a *follower* or *disciple* of Jesus. Then we talked about what it means to be open to transformation so you can live a life that’s led by the Spirit. What we’re doing is talking about a path toward spiritual maturity, and it’s a path that really doesn’t have an end. There’s not a point where we can say, “Yup! I’m here! End of the line. I can just sit back and revel in my spiritual maturity!” It’s a journey not a race. The question I have to bring to the table this week is, “What does living life in the Spirit *look like*?” That’s a hard one to pin down and explain because it’s going to look different from person to person. For me, the song *It is Well with My Soul* best describes what I think living in the Spirit looks like. It’s when we can just let things go and say, “I’m okay with whatever happens.” The Buddhists teach that we are weighed down by attachments, and that in order to function at our best, we need to learn to let go of attachments. As much as I love and appreciate my Buddhist brothers and sisters, I park my bike at the Jesus bike rack, and so I choose to say, “All is well” to declare my freedom from attachments. It’s never easy. But I believe it’s a necessary part of our spiritual maturity. Here’s why I choose to say, “All is Well.”

All is well because God is in charge, not us. Jesse, didn’t you tell us *just last week* that the church should avoid pat answers?! Because “God is in charge, not us” sure sounds like a pat answer! I have a confession to make. I like to be in charge. It may not seem like it because I don’t often play the, “My way or the highway” card when it comes to making decisions in a group situation. However the card I *do* play sometimes is the, “How can I make things go my way without *looking* like I’m trying to make things go my way?” Now before you are tempted to cast stones, let me remind you of Romans 3:23 where the Apostle Paul reminds us that “*all* have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.” See, I think we *all* like to be in charge, at least in certain areas of our lives.

Sure, there may be some situations where we honestly say, “No, I really don’t care one way or the other, whatever will be will be.” But there are other situations in life where we grab on to what we want and we hold on for dear life. Okay, but isn’t it good to be in charge of your own destiny? Sure. We are free people. I think every person longs for freedom. Our country was founded on the very principles of freedom and self-determination. God created us to be free, and has given us the gift of free choice. What we *do* with that freedom and freedom of choice isn’t always good, but it’s good to recognize it for the gift that it is. Because of this freedom, we are not pawns on God’s chessboard. We are not God’s playthings. God does not “control” us in that way. So when I say, “God is in charge, not us,” I’m saying that part of our journey toward spiritual maturity means recognizing when we are using our freedom for selfish reasons. It means recognizing when we want to control things so that they go *our* way rather than taking the time to prayerfully consider what is God’s way.

All is well because we do not need to rescue everyone. When we step out of “crowd religion” and become disciples, we recognize our call to help others in need. Following Jesus means assuming the responsibility of Jesus’ mission and ministry, which according to Luke 4:18-19 means “bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor.” And yes, that’s what we should do. However, being engaged in that kind of ministry can suck the life out of you if you let it. So many people get burned out and experience “compassion fatigue” when they spend every waking minute trying to rescue people. Here’s the thing ... *we aren’t* rescuing people. We are proclaiming good news, and we’re doing whatever we can to help, but when you think about it, we are not the rescuers. Am I right Steven Ministers? That’s God’s work. When we think we are the ones doing the rescuing, we’ve lost sight of what our mission and ministry is, and we’re setting ourselves up for burnout, and when that happens, we are no good to *anyone*. I know we’ve talked about this recently, but remember ... even Jesus took time out to care for his physical and

spiritual needs. He encouraged his disciples to do the same. Jesus was human, and had all the human weaknesses that you and I have. He got hungry. He got tired. The gospel writers say he even got irritable on a few occasions. Last week we read about how in the Garden of Gethsemane he even prayed, “Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” That was his prayer when he was facing the inevitability of betrayal and death! “If someone else can do this, I wouldn’t mind!” Jesus knew when he needed to get away from the crowds so he could charge his spiritual batteries. That’s an important part of *our* spiritual maturity too ... knowing when to stop and say, “It is *not* my job to rescue everyone. It *is* my job to do the best that I can using the gifts and graces for ministry that I have and to recognize when others’ needs overwhelm my own.”

All is well because God’s creation is about harmony, not discord. And before you say, “Jesse, have you not been watching the news?! When has there *ever been* more discord?” Discord exists. For sure. But who is responsible for the discord? We are. Not God. God desires harmony. We know this because there is harmony in the very fabric of what God has created. You can see it in nature. You can see it in birth and in death. You can see it in the intricate ways our bodies are knit together. You can see it in the way that our world just happens to orbit in the perfect distance from our sun. We were created to live and function within the structure of this harmony. But going back to our first point, because we want to be in charge and don’t always make good choices, we live in disharmony. Part of spiritual maturity is recognizing the role we play in creating and maintaining this disharmony. It also involves acting in ways that promote and restore harmony. “But what does that look like?” Well, it looks like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, St. Francis, ... “No-no-no-no Jesse ... those people are like the superheroes of the faith ... what else do you have?” Okay, if you’re going to press me on it, it looks a lot like Mary Mitchel. See, those superheroes of the faith? They were great examples. They made enormous statements in the way they lived their lives, but none of them saw themselves as great or deserving of praise. They found their

strength in that inner-confidence that comes from living a life in the Spirit. And not everyone is going to be a Mother Teresa. But that's okay, because in God's economy it's not *necessary* for everyone to be so ... super. But we all are invited to be in this lifelong process which will have it's movement both forward and backward.

All is well because we don't have all the answers, nor do we have to. I don't know when the church started obsessing over answers. I've heard so many people say, "The Bible has the answer to everything." There is no doubt that the Bible contains answers to a multitude of questions we have. But "everything?" I think that's an overstatement. I do, however, believe that when the Bible is prayerfully read and studied by a community of faith that invites the Holy Spirit to guide that community through the questions, that we can certainly find answers to questions that may not be *directly* addressed in the Bible. If we just had the Bible in front of us, we would get overwhelmed! We were just saying last month how most people get stuck when they run into the first genealogy in the Bible with all the lists of who begat whom! But the beauty of the Holy Spirit being at work in a community of faith is that we aren't left alone to do all the work ourselves. We've got a church family who each brings their God-given wisdom and experience to help us work through this wonderful book. And you know what? Even among the strengthening fellowship of believers, and even with the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide us along, we *still* aren't going to have *all* the *answers*. But I'll guarantee that we'll have better ways of living through the *questions*. Spiritual maturity involves being able to admit that sometimes the questions are more important than the answers and that faith is more important than certitude.

Which leads me to the last one: All is well because our job isn't to be perfect ... it's to be faithful. Spiritual maturity and life in the Spirit is a lifelong process that will have its movement both forward and backward. It is a dynamic process that calls us into an ever-deepening relationship with God. Again, the goal isn't "passing the final exam" or "reaching the top of the mountain," it's to be faithful to the *process*. It's about

being open to the Spirit's movement within us and responsive to that movement in our actions and with others. On our own, we can't just decide to have "Life in the Spirit." Maturity is a gift ... it's not ours to acquire, but to receive. All we can do is to be aware of the steps along the way and to seek an openness to the Spirit's intentions.