

The First Reading is from NRSV Isaiah 6:1-8:

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

The Second Reading is from NRSV Romans 8:12-17

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—
¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

¹²⁻¹⁴ So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go! (*The Message*)

¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike “What's next, Papa?” God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him! (*The Message*)

The Message: Deficit or Dignity

Did you take to heart the children's message this morning? God don't make no junk! We are not junk! We are beloved daughters and sons of the living God. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves we struggle to claim this truth. We feel like junk at least some of the time, for we have all struggled with whether or not we were enough – good enough, smart enough, skilled enough, athletic enough, tall enough, thin enough – you get the picture.

Kristin Misik writes from her feelings of not being enough, saying, "If there was a magic wand that could transform your body, what would you change so you could feel like your most confident, gorgeous self? Whether we are male or female, most of us have at least one, if not a handful, of fixes we'd like to make to our appearance – less pounds or less wrinkles, thicker hair or stronger bones, longer legs or more muscle. If truth be told, we probably have a few fixes to just about everything in our lives, because we so easily see our deficits. We so easily see how we do not measure up to expectations. And if we listen to our mental observations of others... we see deficits in others as well, if we don't verbalize them.

Deficit or dignity? That is our question today.

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The whole earth is brimming with God's glory. All of humanity and every corner of creation is full of God's glory. Yet, the first words out of Isaiah's mouth are these: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Instantaneously Isaiah focuses on deficits, his and his people.

Now I imagine that if we were to experience a vision of God sitting on a throne, high and lofty, our deficits would surface for us as well and the list would probably be long. We know our own foibles. We know that we do not measure up to God's glory. And Apostle Paul makes that abundantly clear to us by his words to the church in Rome, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Yes, we have sinned. And if we say we have no sin, then we deceive ourselves. Do you see why it is so easy to focus on our deficits and not our dignity? Why it is so easy to focus on the deficits of others?

In our New Testament text this morning, we heard Paul say this: "If you live according to the flesh, you will die." Now the Greek word "sarx" that Paul translates as flesh has layers of meaning. The most basic meaning and the most common in secular Greek, is the material that covers the bones of animals or humans (1 Cor. 15:39; Eph. 2:11, Col. 2:13; Gal. 6:13). Paul also uses the word to mean the whole human body (2 Cor. 7:1, Gal. 4:13; Eph. 5:31). But even more often, Paul uses the word to generally refer to human beings, not just their physical bodies (1 Cor. 1-28-29; Gal. 1:16, 2:16). In doing this Paul uses the word to explain the human state or condition neutrally (Rom 1:3-4, 9:5), but then he also uses the word to designate the human condition of fallenness (Gal 5:16-17).¹ And this is where St. Augustine picks up and runs with Paul's usage, which has historically led to the conclusion that flesh equals bad or at very least something not to be trusted. The flesh, in other words, is what leads us astray.

¹ Website source of information about Paul's usage of the Greek word 'sarx' (flesh) - <https://reformedreader.wordpress.com/2015/03/06/flesh-sarx-in-pauls-epistles/>

Listen again to Paul's words, "So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Do you see why deficits take center stage, especially in relation to what our bodies do or do not do? It seems the only way to live, according to this passage, is to put to death the deeds of the body. Yet, you and I are not just spirits, we are enfleshed spirits. As I alluded to in my devotion on Wednesday, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and lived among us. The incarnation brought spirit and flesh together, for Jesus was fully human, fully divine. Fully flesh and fully spirit. This being human requires both our body and our spirit or as Richard Rohr writes, "It appears that for God, matter really matters, [for] this Creator of ours is patiently determined to put matter and spirit together, almost as if they were not complete without the other."

So is there another way to unpack this passage which uses the Greek word translated "flesh"? Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates part of this passage, "So don't you see that we don't owe **this old do-it-yourself life** one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and **get on with your new life.**" It's not our physical body or "flesh" as Paul writes that is our demise; Peterson's interpretation is that it is our belief that we can do life on our own, without God. Or said another way, "If we live according to our ego needs, we will surely die and never really live." Why? Well, it seems our egos are only schooled in deficits, not dignity. Our egos are always comparing, always judging either finding ourselves more than someone else or finding ourselves not enough or unworthy.

Now if we return to Isaiah, I wonder if you noticed that Isaiah said something besides "Woe is me"? Although, deficits were front and center, Isaiah marvels at the realization that he is in the presence of God. He says, "I have seen the Lord." And it appears that he lived to tell about it! There is "woe," but also "wow"! What if our deficits are not our whole story?

Way back in 1983, Matthew Fox's book entitled, *Original Blessing* put it this way, "Religion has failed people in the West," for its "religious traditions have preferred redemption to creation, sin to ecstasy, and individual introspection to cosmic awareness and appreciation." You can imagine that his psychological-spiritual book raised quite a stir in religious circles, for in the West and I'll add for the majority of Christianity's history, original sin (which for me is deficit thinking) takes center stage, not original blessing. Or as I heard someone else succinctly say, "Christianity for the most part starts its story from Genesis 3, not Genesis 1."

What drew me to review Fox's book, as I prepared for today, was my memory of his relentless scriptural quotations to make his case for original blessing. Fox writes, "The creation tradition, that is Genesis 1, has been forgotten almost entirely – [yet] it has been kept alive by artists, poets, scientists, feminists, political prophets, but not theologians. Theologians and the church as a whole has focused on original sin, which focuses us on deficits. Might there be another way as Fox suggests?"

Listen to some repetitive words from Genesis 1: "God saw that the light was good... and God saw that it was good... God blessed them... and God saw that it was good... Let us make humankind in our image... God blessed them... God saw everything that God had made and indeed, it was very good." Fox writes, "Our spiritual task is to be filled with the energetic creative word of God and go about our task of healing, celebrating, and co-creating, for the Word made

flesh wishes to be incarnate in us.” Or as Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” Or as he said in our text this morning, “This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave tending life” – deficit thinking and behaving. “It’s an adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike, ‘What’s next, Papa?’ God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who God is, and we know who we are: Parent and children.”

Do we really know who we are? Do we really know whose we are? Listen again to God through the prophet Isaiah, “You, you and you are precious and honored and I love you.” Remember, God don’t make no junk. God infuses each and every one of us with inherent dignity that cannot be destroyed by any evaluation of race, religion, gender, sexuality, nationality, class, education, physical ability or IQ. We are all sons and daughters of God, clothed in Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who are invited to be co-creators with this Triune God.

Do you trust this to be true for you? Does the original blessing of the faith story resonate within you? “God saw everything that God had made and indeed, it was very good.” Not junk, but good! Or as Paul’s letters to the early church suggest that the old world of deficits is forever gone and a new world of universal human dignity grounded in our objective and universal Christ identity has begun.

As people of faith, we should be asking adventurously expectant, “What’s next Papa?” for the Lord said in the presence of Isaiah, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Will you? Will we as a church?

The powers and principalities of this world want to keep us cowering in fear and mired in deficits, so that we broker in superiority. This is what it means to live in the “flesh” according to Paul, a world where egos thrive, while humanity and all of creation suffer. We will surely die, says Apostle Paul, if we live this way.

But, there is another way. We just need to respond to the invitation being offered by the Divine Mystery we call God saying, “I’ll go, send me.” I’ll work, by your grace, to restore dignity to refugees and immigrants, to the hungry, to individuals with bodily or developmental limitations, to the imprisoned, to those without homes, to those who are impoverished, to those who struggle with injustices, to children at risk, to those whom society has forgotten, written off or forgotten.

Yet, in order to be a life-giving co-creator, we must honor the Divine Indwelling within ourselves first. We must recognize our own eternal DNA as both divine and pure gift; because then and only then will we be able to see the same DNA in those whom we serve. Only then will we be continually transformed in our serving by those whom we serve. All of us, not just some of us, are sons and daughters of God. And we all share responsibility for co-creating the world as God intends for it to be. Yet, God patiently waits for us to will and to choose our response.

God doesn’t coerce, God simply invites us, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us this day, tomorrow and the next?” I pray we are willing to step up and say, I am not going to focus on my deficits any longer. I am going to trust my inherent dignity. “Here, here God, here am I; send me!” Amen.