

Fully Awake, Fully Alive

Father Larry

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb of Lazarus. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried again with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him and let him go" (John 11:38-44).

There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. 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 to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 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. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 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. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit that dwells in you (Romans 8:1-11).

Brenda and I used to live with our daughter Carolyn and Jeff our son-in-law, and Autumn and Asher, in a big house in the Colorado Rockies. Early in the morning while everyone was still sleeping Autumn, would come with quick quiet steps down the great staircase, turning on all the lights as she made her way through the house and into our bedroom. In a happy little voice she would ask, "Granddaddy are you awake, are you conscious? I thought you would like to know it's morning; it's time to get up! I didn't think you would want to stay sleep all day – would you? Let's do something fun," she would suggest. When you are only four or five the day is not for sleeping, it's for being awake – being awake to fun, to adventure, to climbing the boulders outside your house, to going through the magical green door into imaginary land "where more things than you

can imagine exist.” In both the Old Testament and Gospel reading there is an awakening from the sleep of death, and in the Epistle, real life is seen as being awake to the animating Spirit of Christ in us. “To set the mind on the Spirit,” says Paul, “is life and peace.” Wake up! Get ready for Easter! You don’t want to miss it – you don’t want to sleep your life away, do you?

In his classic, *Walden Pond*, Henry David Thoreau observed, “Millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, and only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake,” he wrote, “is to be alive. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me.” The Quaker, Thomas Kelley, noted that we may live life on two levels. One is the external level. Some people live only on this level. They run breathlessly from one activity to the other without really being present to anything they are doing – never savoring the joy, the feeling of being alive. There is no voice that speaks from the depths to question or to infuse what they are doing with meaning, and so they miss the experience of what it means to really be alive. It is as if they had arrived at the airport late and discovered that their flight had left without them. Most of the people you see on the street are asleep. They have jobs, careers (sometimes highly successful ones) families, and friends. They work and play but they are asleep.

To be awake is to be attentive and focused on God, or as Paul says in the reading, it is “to set the mind on the things of the Spirit.” It is to know God as that sublime power and mystery that infuses all things and inhabits all things – amoebas and whales, tiny glistening grains of sand, immense shining galaxies and the human heart – your heart. To be awake is to see and know the beauty of a flower, a poem, an idea, a kind gesture, an act of courage, a tender emotion, the moral law within, a symphony, a painting, or the setting sun without having to analyze it, but simply being with it. To be awake, aware, attentive is to be conscious of loving and being loved, of always and everywhere being in the presence of the Living God.

I really like the way Eugene Peterson renders this lesson from Romans in his contemporary version, *The Message*: “Simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in you. . . Those who trust God’s action in them find that God’s Spirit is in them – living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads out into the open, into a spacious free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God.”

“Obsession with self is a dead end in these matters.” The New Revised Standard version says, “To set the mind on the flesh is death.” Let me give you a real life example. I was ordained to the ministry when I was twenty-two and became the sole pastor of a small congregation in Bakersfield. An elderly man joined our church because where he was previously a member they stipulated how much of his income he had to give to the church. And we didn’t do that. We said that was between the individual member and God. And because he was pretty tightfisted he liked that. He was shabbily dressed. He looked poor. But he insisted that he had a lot of money. And he loved to tell the story of how he had become wealthy. He said that he acquired a small farm in Arkansas. By

living very frugally he had been able to accumulate more and more land. As he would come to the end of the story his hands would begin to make a grasping motion. “And I got more, and more, and more,” he would say. As the contribution basket passed by on Sunday mornings, he would hold his hand over the basket as if putting something in, but nothing ever fell from his hand into the basket. It is an ugly story, in part because of his own lack of sophistication or refinement, but also ugly because he was dead and death can be very ugly. “To set the mind on the flesh is death. To set the mind on the Spirit is life.”

Now Paul anticipates that someone may say, “Look Paul, we all come to the same end. We all die. So what’s the difference?” Paul’s answer is to point to the resurrection. “If the Spirit dwells in you. . . the One who raised Christ from the dead. . . will give life to your mortal bodies, also through the Spirit that dwells in you.” Some people have a hard time believing that. Some find it too unscientific – a quaint and old-fashioned notion. But John Polkinghorne, quantum physicist and Anglican priest, makes this observation: “The real me,” says Polkinghorne, “cannot be my material body because that material is constantly changing. . . What is significant is the pattern, not the atoms that make it up. The real me is the immensely complicated pattern in which these ever changing atoms are organized.” “It seems to me,” he concludes, “to be an intelligent and coherent hope that God will remember the pattern that is me and recreate it in a new environment of God’s choosing, by the great act of God’s final resurrection.”

I like Polkinghorne’s argument, but I like even better the personal discovery made by our friend Dr. Ed Noffsinger. Ed grew up in a small Midwestern town where everyone was expected to go to church. His mother was a woman with a very deep and warm faith. She was a devout catholic all of her life. Ed’s father was a member of a small protestant denomination that stressed a life of humility, simplicity and service. In college Ed renounced his Christian faith. I suppose that in the words of our Epistle he set his mind on self rather than Spirit. In fact, he became a militant atheist. Ed is a brilliant man, and with degrees in both physics and clinical psychology was able to attack people of faith, or their beliefs, with devastating effectiveness. One terrible day Ed got word that his mother, who had been widowed for a number of years had died. He immediately left San Francisco and went to the family home in a little unsophisticated town in Iowa. Alone in his mother’s house that night he felt completely desolate. If what he believed was true, then everything he and others had experienced of his mother – her love, generosity, and kindness, her courage, honesty, and faith in the goodness of God and life had all now come to nothing – meant nothing. The next day he went to the church to make funeral arrangements. And in the priest’s office he saw a painting you may have seen before. It is a painting of two welcoming hands – the hands of Christ. Ed, who had always been so tough minded, began to sob right there in the priest’s office. It was the pivotal moment in his life, the moment in which Ed found that he could not believe that all that was best about his mother, himself, or any of us in the end comes to nothing – and that therefore there must be a welcoming God, One in whom, as Saint Paul puts it, “we live and move and have our very being.”

The day is dawning
It's time to wake up
You wouldn't want to sleep your life away –
Would you?
Amen.