

I've been doing Noonday Prayer online nearly every day for months— so when today's Psalm came up in the lectionary—I knew it by heart.

You know how the Baptists are really good at pulling out random bible quotes in conversation? Well, you can only imagine my glee when I heard:

*“Accept, O LORD, the willing tribute of my lips, * and teach me your judgments, “*
and I nearly shouted out---

“My life is always in my hand, yet I do not forget your law.”

BAM!

Actually, I remember this Psalm especially well, because for the first few weeks of Noonday Prayer I was forever getting it wrong.

I would say “O Lord, our lives are always in your hand...” YOUR hand.

So the first few times I read this I would have to say, “Nope. That’s wrong. “My life is always in my hand.”

Except-- then it sounded like I was being argumentative--- or wanting to be in God’s hand or something.

Then I would have to explain... “You see—the Psalm ACTUALLY says....my life is in MY hand....” And I could just hear them say, “Sure it does...”

But today—for all of you—here’s the proof!

“My life is always in my hand, yet—I do not forget your law.”

Because no matter what life throws at you, no matter how bad things seem, no matter how much we want to chuck it all and not be responsible anymore—our lives are always in our own hand.

Paul knew this. Paul was constantly writing letters to people who didn’t want to take responsibility for their choices.

But --was Paul having any of it?

Come on. This is Paul we’re talking about here. Of COURSE he wasn’t having any of it. Take the passage from Romans this morning.

“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.

It’s a temptation to read this passage as being all about carnality. (Come on. We have kids listening to this.) But you know that’s where your mind goes when Paul starts talking about Flesh. Admit it.

But, actually, the “flesh” that Paul is referring to has nothing to do with sex. Or gratifying our baser desires.

When Paul talks of “flesh,” he is speaking of something which—to his mind--- is much worse than that. And there ARE things worse than that---he’s talking about people being “worldly”.

“Flesh,” in Paul’s mind—is equated with people who are consumed by all the things the world tells us are more important than God:

- money,
- more and more worldly goods (see—there’s a reason they’re called “worldly” goods),
- competitiveness,
- combativeness,
- power....
- winning.
- These are what the world says we need—not life in the Spirit. These are things the world rewards.

How about an example from real life?

Your boss expects you to put in as many hours as it takes a week to get things done. He says he values your work ethic and really depends on your initiative. Your boss rewards you by raising your salary when you comply with this expectation. This is good for your family’s finances, makes you feel really indispensable, and – more than anything--makes you feel good about yourself.

It also makes you feel like you never see your friends, you are starting to take sleep aids because you can’t sleep, and you are getting short with your family when they don’t see how hard you are working and they don’t pitch in enough.

But- your life is in your hands—so you ponder the choices.

You can work a bit harder and hire someone to clean your house and pick up the slack. Win-win. You can spend more time with your family, and your finances will allow your family to be able to go on a cool vacation or allow your kids to go to that camp they really want to go to. BEST CHOICE, right? Suck it up—you tell yourself—work a little harder. It will be worth it!

Here’s another choice: You tell your boss that you need to set a couple of boundaries, and you understand it might be harder at first—for him. You tell him you need to have some dedicated family time—no more working 7 days a week. You are willing to help out in emergency situations, with the understanding that getting your job done faster is not an emergency. You don’t mention a decrease in salary, though you would take it if it gave you more time.

Which would you do?

The world—the flesh—wants the approbation, the money, it doesn’t want to tick off the boss. Who cares if you are getting run down? Not able to fit in anything but work? You’ll worry about that later. Much later.

The Spirit reminds you that your family—your friends, are just as important as work. Rest is integral to one's wholeness. We can't love God and our neighbor if we can't love ourselves enough to put some limits on our willingness to over function... The Spirit points out that death by exhaustion is the world's value—not God's.

So I'll read the next part – and I'll replace the word flesh with world—and you'll see better what Paul would say to us today:

“To set the mind on what the world wants is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on following the ways of the world is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are pleasing the world cannot please God.”

Tough choice, huh? Our life is always in our hand, but we are also God's child, and we can hear the call of the Spirit.

I know, it was a lot easier when we thought that flesh meant – carnality—wasn't it? When we thought *that* it was much easier to feel good about our self-control in that one little part of our lives.

Paul knew it was hard to ignore the siren call of the world. Because “the flesh”—the world-- can be very persuasive.

But Paul knew the Spirit, too—how it encourages us to stop finding our sense of worth in how indispensable we can be--or how *much money we make--or by how much we are willing to put aside our very self* to get the job done.

The Spirit's job is to give us our life back. The Spirit helps us keep our lives tight in our hands. The Spirit shows us how important we are ---not because of how much we can do—but just because we are all fearfully and wonderfully made.

The Spirit whispers to us “ Don't give up your love and your time and your self—not even if you are offered the world for it.”

Amen.