Years ago when I lived in Czechoslovakia (it was so long ago there was a Czechoslovakia) I got in a discussion with a Czech friend of mine about how Czech and Slovak were different languages. I asked him if he could understand Slovak and he said that he could, leading me to ask him if he could speak Slovak and he told me he could not. I then asked him if he were speaking to a Slovak what he would speak and he told me would speak Czech adding that the Slovak would understand him without any problem. Trying to close the circle I asked in what language the Slovak would respond and he told me Slovak and that he would understand it. Which all led me to reiterate my initial question about whether Czech and Slovak were different languages and he again assured me that they were. What was painfully obvious to my friend made little sense to me, possibly because, in the English-speaking world, we would probably have called what my friend was calling a different language, a different dialect. But the other reason I probably could not grasp the distinction was because I was not fluent in Czech nor in Slovak. What looked the same to someone on the outside may have all sorts of distinctions to someone on the inside. And quite honestly these small distinctions may in fact make lead to very big differences even if not apparent to those less familiar with the details. And small distinctions are also what I want to focus on today in our reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans. In it he states, “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.” There is a distinction being made between flesh and spirit, but what I want to concentrate on today is exactly how we make this distinction, because if we incorrectly understand what Paul means by flesh and spirit, we can end up with a very different version of Christianity (and by very different I mean heretical). And so I want to take this deep dive into nuance today so that we can hear the differences in the same way my friend could hear the differences between Czech and Slovak.

The answer that most people probably have if asked what is the difference between flesh and spirit would be something along the lines of good and bad, with flesh being bad and spirit being good. Which is fine as far as it goes but if pressed for a little more detail many people might locate this good and bad as separate and distinct things sort of like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. That is they would say that we have good parts and we have bad parts – our flesh is the bad and our spirit is the good. But this is not quite right at least if we say this is their permanent state. And here is where we get into the Czech/Slovak distinction so let me try to explain.

The thing that we cannot do in distinguishing between flesh and spirit is we cannot turn Gnostic. Gnosticism as many of you know was an early Church heresy and one that really never seems to go away. The relevant part for today’s discussion is how they understood good and evil. Gnosticism posited that there were two creators, equally powerful with one being good and one being bad. Sort of like if you gave Snidely Whiplash and Dudley Do-Right divine powers. The end result of this is that you have a world composed of good stuff and bad stuff. And since we are part of the world we are composed of this same mish mash. It is usually couched in terms of a good soul and an evil nasty body. And so salvation in this understanding happens by chucking aside all of the bad nasty stuff and concentrating solely on the good. But that is not Christian because Christianity is not about discarding but is rather about saving. The Christian narrative says something much different than the Gnostics. It says that God created the world and what he created was good, but that we rebelled and brought evil into the world. So this means that the problem is not the stuff of creation the problem is our rebellion against and separation from God. Or put another way the problem occurs when we use creation as a means by which to rebel against God. What this all means in terms of the Gospel is that when the rebellion and separation are taken care of all of the other stuff will be fixed. The Christian narrative is that Christ came not to separate us from the bad stuff but rather to redeem the bad stuff.

There is an epic poem titled *Psychomachia, or Battle/Contest of the Soul* written sometime probably in the early fifth century by a guy named Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. The poem details the battle between good virtues and evil vices or sins. Or put rather succinctly it lays out virtues to counter vices. For example in the poem the sin of pride is countered by the virtue of humility and the sin of envy is countered by the virtue of kindness. Much of the idea behind this is that it is not the stuff of creation that is the problem but our relationship to it. So, for example, greed is a sin because it is the hoarding of creation for our own selfish ends. The virtue that counters this is charity. Charity, which for short we will call a generosity of spirit, does not hoard but looks to use God’s creation as a way to benefit others and grow God’s kingdom. When we are greedy we are inward looking, but when we are charitable we are outward looking. The focus shifts from us to God and the same material that once caused us to sin can now be used to further God’s kingdom.

This is a stupid example but one that is very timely. Think of the people who a few weeks ago went to Costco and purchased 432 rolls of toilet paper. Now unless they have a serious medical issue that requires them to burn through two or three rolls a day there is no way anyone is going to consume that amount of toilet paper in the time of this quarantine. Their actions cause real harm because they have caused a great deal of anxiety for those people who might need a roll or two. The problem in this situation though is not the toilet paper it is how these people reacted towards it. If these same people now went and checked to see if their neighbors were running a little low and handed out some of their stash using proper social distancing techniques this situation could be redeemed. The same materials that took part in greed could now take part in generosity.

As Christians we believe that there is nothing that is beyond redemption and so we are not looking to write off certain parts of creation or certain parts of ourselves. Rather we are looking to redeem those things. The distinction that Paul makes today is not between redeemable and irredeemable but rather about how we use God’s creation. Which should make us ask: Are we using God’s good creation for sin or for the service of God. And this distinction is not just with outside items but includes us as well. In Eucharistic Prayer I we say, “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.” There is not one part of us that is so wrong that it cannot be redeemed by God we simply need to follow the words of the Prayer Book and offer and present it unto the Lord this day and forevermore.