Since it has been a while since I preached a sermon about Gnosticism, I figured it was time to leap back into the everyone’s favorite Christian heresy – because, as you all know, there is nothing more fun than sermons about heresies. Also, I should let you know that all this talk about Gnosticism will ultimately tie into our reading from Romans. At least that is the hope. And now, to paraphrase Olivia Newton John – Let’s Get Heretical.

The term gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge, but it is sometimes enhanced to mean not just knowledge but secret knowledge. How much secret knowledge there really was is debatable but somewhat like scientologists they tended to promise that there was some. I am not sure if this secret knowledge would eventually get you on a spaceship with John Travolta and Tom Cruise like in scientology, but we can dream. Anyway, back to my point. What I want to focus on today is not the secret part but rather the parts of Gnosticism about which we know something. As I said Gnosticism is a Christian heresy, meaning that it takes parts of Christianity and gives them a little twist. So, it starts with the same basic argument -- Jesus came to earth to save us. However, it is when we get to questions about what we are saved from and how exactly that saving takes place that things get a little funky. And I am using the term funky not in the not in the James Brown sense of the word but more in the Junior High locker room sense. For you see, Gnostics have a much more Star Wars like version of the Christian faith. In Star Wars there was the Force, and the Force had a good and bad side, or light and dark in Star Wars terminology. Both sides were equally powerful, and it was up to the individual to decide which to choose. So in the Gnostic tradition the purpose of Jesus coming to earth was to help us choose the correct side of the force. And one more thing about Gnosticism and the way it understands the world is that both of these things – the good and the bad – exist inside of us in the form of flesh and spirit. Jesus can be useful in helping us choose the spirit side but Gnostics really have no need for Jesus in any other capacity. And so, with that background, let’s take a look at the passage we have from Romans today and see how it could get off the rails if we were Gnostic.

Here is a little snippet and hopefully you see where it could be misread to appear Gnostic. “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. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” The Gnostic way that you could read this would be to say I have two parts of me one is the flesh and one is the spirit. If I follow the spirit part of me and not the flesh part then all will be well. With Jesus serving as a sort of divine Tony Robins, there to help me tap into the right giant within me. But that is not really what it is saying, which is good because Tony Robbins kind of creeps me out. What the passage in Romans is saying is that flesh and spirit are not representative of good and bad which dwells within us rather they are representative of life with or without God. You might want to even call it sanctified or unsanctified. Flesh does not literally mean my skin and the other physical parts of the body but rather the parts of me that are without God. Similarly, spirit is not a metaphysical concept in Paul’s telling but are rather the parts of us that are infused with God.

And I am not just making this up. Paul is in the midst of a somewhat complicated and somewhat opaque argument which we are kind of dropped off in the middle of it in today’s reading. But the big idea that undergirds everything that Paul says in this passage is that through the coming of Jesus everything has changed. And to demonstrate this change he uses the terms flesh and spirit. Flesh is the before and spirit is the after. It is not that there are two parts of us, a wicked and bad body and a delightful and pure spirit. No there is either us with Jesus or us without Jesus. The argument Paul lays out is that apart from Jesus we are not much. We are “bondage and decay” in his words. No matter how much we try or reflect or meditate we will go no further than the crooked state of humanity allows. If you want the cliché version, it is like trying to get blood from a turnip. No matter what we do, no blood will come because the turnip simply does not have the means to produce blood.

The 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger who was president of Albert Ludwigs Universitaet and also a Nazi lickspittle had very interesting take on philosophy. His basic view was that everything went downhill after Aristotle. He was an atheist and saw Christianity as a dead end, so he set out to go back to the point before, in his estimation, philosophy had lost its way. But there is something funny in the way he does what he does. Some people have called it trying to do theology without God. This may be because before he became an atheist and a philosopher, he had been a Jesuit seminarian. His most famous work is *Being and Time* (Sein und Zeit) where he seeks to understand the essence of being. It is kind of complicated, esoteric and pretty German but there is something kind of amusing about it. After he gets through speculating on the nature of being he seeks to explain where it all should lead. Something like the before and after which Paul brings us to today when he talks about flesh and spirit. However, since Heidegger cannot use God to differentiate a before and after, he ends up concluding much the same thing as most of the Disney Princesses and that is we are to follow our heart. He says it in more complicated ways (he is German after all) but he basically says you have to be your authentic self. That is, we are to gaze deep within ourselves and find out who we truly are and then do the things that our true self wants us to do. This is, of course, pretty stupid advice especially in the hands of someone like Jeffrey Dahmer or Heidegger’s favorite nutjob, Adolph Hitler. Put another way, what Heidegger found at the end of his search for being was a kind of Gnosticism. Everything is inside of us and we just have to think long and hard and we will, to use an Army slogan, be all that we can be. But that does not seem to work because we are relying on ourselves and we are the same people who got us into trouble in the first place.

What Paul is contrasting today is not the good parts of us and the bad parts of us. Rather what he is contrasting is what can be done with and without God. And while I know thinking about heresies and even understanding them can seem like a “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin” type discussion there is something of value to learn. The more self-absorbed a society is the more appealing Gnosticism becomes. For it tells us that true happiness lies within thereby blessing our self-absorption. But Christianity tells a different story, a story of God coming to earth to save us from that very self that Gnosticism so elevates. We seek to “be set free from [this] bondage” so that we may in Paul’s words “obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Meaning we will be God’s own this day and forevermore.