



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Jesus”

Sermon on Romans 6:1-11

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The writings of Paul are not always the easiest to follow. But, they are not exactly cryptic, either. In order to read and pull out the meaning of Paul’s writings, it is necessary to know a little context.

Now, when discussing the writings of Paul, Donovan likes to say that “Paul has a problem.” Which at first, might sound like “This guy is a mess.” But I think what Donovan really means is that Paul has a problem to address.

After his conversion, Paul spent the rest of his life traveling all over the known world to introduce people to Jesus. And, wherever he went, people began to follow Jesus. Before Paul left the new Christ followers, he made sure to raise up leaders for the group. They were not yet called churches, but Paul was planting churches. And, everywhere Paul went, he stayed in touch. The leaders would write letters to Paul or send a messenger. Then, Paul would write a letter in response. In each of his letters he was writing specifically to a church about their specific challenges or confusion.

So, the Christ followers had a problem, and Paul was committed to helping them through that problem. This is why his writings are so filled with theological teaching. He was not interested in giving the church an answer about who was right. He had no intention of creating rule books or by laws that

they could use to govern themselves when they disagreed. No. Paul wanted them to understand the truth about Jesus, because understanding Jesus can change one's perspective on any challenge, difference, or person.

Paul's letter writing flows so smoothly out of his obvious rhetorical style. So often, we see this in scripture. His address in the Areopagus. His conversations with fellow Jews he hopes will see Jesus as the promised Messiah. Even in discussion with other Apostles. Paul seems always ready for point and counterpoint.

Carolyn Helsel suggests that when reading Paul's writing: It's like we are listening in on someone else's conversation. And, frankly, that is not always the most inspiring way to glean meaning for ourselves. However, there is no doubt that these letters of Paul have been preserved and passed down to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, as we read today, listen to what Paul has to say to us about sin and baptism, and death and life.

Romans 6:1-11

6 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Baptism is a sacrament. And a good working definition of a sacrament is "A visible sign of an invisible grace." Or put another way, "An outward sign of an inward grace."

In baptism, we can hear the water poured and splashed. We can touch the water. We can feel it placed on our head then drip down our cheeks. And we hear the words of grace in our Baptism liturgy, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.” If you were baptized as an infant, like I was, you don’t remember these sounds or feelings for yourself. But, when we see others being baptized it serves as a reminder of our own baptism.

It is not a Baptism Sunday today. Last week, we had a baptism, and I am sure we will have many more to come. There were 2 baby girls born in the last few weeks, with about 6 babies who are on the way!

Baptism Sundays are wonderful! There are sweet babies and young children brought forward by their parents. Occasionally we have adults or youth who are baptized, which are exciting days, as well. And we are all so thrilled to welcome these little people and grown believers into our fellowship. At the right time, we whole-heartedly make the promise to teach each one about Jesus and encourage them in Faith. And we mean it.

Even so, I wonder if we think MORE about what WE are promising to do than what those waters of baptism really mean?

Paul says that in Baptism, we are more than cleansed from sin, we are dead to it. We are dead to sin.

Maybe you are like me, and you are thinking, “Paul, doesn’t it make more sense to say that sin is ‘dead to us’? I mean, it is the “dead” thing that doesn’t have any power, right?”

But, of course, Paul has chosen his words very carefully. He has chosen to say that “we are dead to sin” to make sure we understand that this is because of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Paul wants to remind us that Jesus’ death is what conquered sin. Only Jesus could do that. And we are Baptized into his death.

Sin no longer has the power to hang over our head and separate us from God. And it is not because we had the good sense to be baptized or to follow Jesus. By no means! This is only because of Jesus.

“If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Christ.”

Have you ever noticed that – outside of pastoral care and when planning memorial services—here at Westminster we don’t talk about heaven a lot? It’s not like it never comes up. Nor are we avoiding it. It’s just that, well, Heaven is not the point of the Christian faith. It is a promise. It is comforting. Heaven is real in ways beyond our imaginations. But heaven is not the point of our faith. No. The point of Christian Faith is to Live with Christ.

Some traditions spend more time talking about how to get into heaven and what will keep you from heaven or even send you “down there.” Other traditions might even try to “scare the hell out of a person.” But, where we spend eternity is not really the point of Christian Faith. How we Live with Christ is the point. Both now—right now and for always.

This is an important part of what Paul is trying to communicate.

Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are now free from sin so that we can live with Jesus—everyday, and beyond the end of our days.

Immanuel, God is with us. During Advent and Christmas, we bring to mind, often, that one name for the Messiah, for Jesus, is “Immanuel.” Of course, that name applies all year. It is not something we need to put away with the nativity scene or the Advent wreath. The truth is, Jesus is always with us. There is comfort in this statement. It reminds us we are not alone. And it reminds us that Jesus is always right with me, right with you, right now. And right now, and in all the moments to come.

We need this reminder. All too often the Christian life gets reduced to people who are trying to be more like Jesus. And we are. That Christians endeavor to follow in Jesus’ steps. Even to Live up to his name that we carry as Christians. And we do. But God with us—Immanuel—points to what Paul is talking about today. We are not called to “Live up to” the ways of Jesus.

Rather, we are invited to “Live with” Jesus. We are not called to reach toward a high bar that was set by Jesus in his lifetime. Because Jesus is here with us, now, and we with him.

Of course, the fact that Jesus has promised to be with us, is a comfort. AND I imagine it could feel a little like, “What? He’s here? He knows where I am? What I am thinking? And Jesus was with me when I……?!?! Awkward!

But we don’t need to think about Jesus as a private detective watching our every move. Or as a watcher who sees everything when it happens and knows what will happen because he knows your thoughts. Jesus is not an Elf on the Shelf who is going to report back to the fullness of the God head about what you and I have been up to. No, Jesus is with us in love and with grace.

In his own death, Christ conquered sin. And we are baptized into his death which Paul says means we are dead to sin. This too, is a gift.

Think of it like getting a new Identity.

Craig and I are coming up on 27 years of marriage. When we got married, I made the choice to change my name and to take his last name. Boaz is a good biblical name, after all. Before we were married my legal signature was Stephanie S. Hanson. But, when I changed my name, I bumped my middle name and substituted my maiden name. So, my signature became Stephanie H. Boaz. I was excited to do this. It was a big deal.

And yet, for the first few months, every time I went to write a check—I would mess up my signature. I kept signing as Stephanie S Hanson instead of Stephanie H Boaz. I wasted so many checks. At the time, this was kind of a big deal.

I realize that some of you have never used a check. Well, basically, checks were what we used before debit cards. And they cost money. So, every time I voided one, I was wasting money. Checks were, still are, legal documents. You have to fill them out correctly. And here I was signing the wrong name.

Finally, one teller at the bank told me to stop voiding each check I signed incorrectly. If I got it wrong, legally, I could cross it off and put my initials beside the crossed off part. Then, I could sign my new legal name just above. And, you know, this really helped. There were some pretty messy checks for a while there. But it actually helped me. Not just because I didn't waste any money, but also because my mistake was followed up quickly by the reminder of my new identity.

And this is another gift of Baptism. We are marked and claimed as God's own. It is a new identity in Christ.

Richard Rohr says, "Sin primarily describes a state of fragmentation—when the part thinks it is separate from the whole. It's the loss of any inner experience of who we are in God."

We have our identity in Jesus who is always with us.

One of my most favorite stories to share is about a woman named Patrice, who joined with a prayer group while I was serving as a hospital chaplain. Her prayers were so different from mine. And I was always so taken aback by her words. She prayed beautiful prayers. And she prayed to God just like her best friend. One of the most impactful things she prayed, was, "Lord, I thank you for waking me up this morning. I thank you for opening my eyes to another day with you by my side." In hearing her pray this way, it made me think more deeply about what it means that Jesus is with me. Right by my side. And he isn't just sitting there or watching over me. He is waking me up. He is surprising me. He is guiding me. Jesus is with me and he is active.

I hope I always remember this is true. And, when I forget, I pray there will be someone in a prayer group, or at the bank or here at church who reminds me Jesus is with me. And I hope I get to do the same for you.