

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, June 21, 2020

3rd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 12/Proper 7/Year A

First Reading: Jeremiah 20:7-13

Second Reading: Romans 6:1b-11

Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:24-39

Sermon Title: “From Worship to Witness”

Theme

In baptism we were incorporated into the reality of Christ’s death and resurrection. We have been made new in Christ through his death and resurrection to live freed from sin.

Text

^{1b}Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been 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 too 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, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have 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.

Sermon

This weekend is Father's Day weekend, and wouldn't you know it, the Gospel text for the day is Jesus' diatribe about what a life of faith might mean for First Century converts to his way. In it specifically, he mentioned discord in the disciple's family, and while converting to Christianity in First Century Palestine probably would have caused that kind of family trauma, most of us are probably from Christian families and so his warning doesn't apply to us directly. So I am going to preach on the Second Reading from Romans because I do think what Paul had to say to the Christian fellowship in Rome does resonate with us today.

First, we need just a little background.

This passage begins with Paul asking,

^{1b}Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?

To give us some context for why he would ask such a question, we need to go back a couple of verses where Paul wrote:

²⁰But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Here Paul went back to the days of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Before the Exodus, there were no specific "chosen people." That makes sense, right? God created *all people*, but shortly thereafter sin entered the picture. At the point of Moses, God had gotten so frustrated with the whole of humanity that God said, "I'll select one tribe of people and raise them up. I will give them laws on how they are to behave and cultivate my relationship with them and bless them. And when other nations see how blessed they are, they will be drawn to them, like a light to the nations." This was God's plan for the Hebrew people – that they will be "as a light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

Back to this passage from Chapter 5, out of God's grace, God gave the Hebrews the Law.

But you know what happened, the Hebrews broke the Law – isn't that just like people? The Law simply pointed out human sinfulness.

So God, out of God's grace, gave them the sacrificial system. They sinned, they repented and made a sacrifice and all was good, go and sin no more.

But you know what happened, the Hebrews continued to break the Law – isn't that just like people?

So God gave them Judges, and Kings, and Prophets to help guide them in holy living.

But you know what happened, the Hebrews, by then, known as the Israelites, continued to sin – isn't that just like people?

So having rejected the Law, the Judges, the Kings, and the prophets, God God's self came down from heaven in the form of God's Son, Jesus the Christ. Through his ministry of preaching and teaching, and performing signs and miracles, he, Jesus, was God's last and best hope for the world.

But you know what happened, the Israelites, by then known as the Jews, continued to sin and rejected the Son and ultimately hung him on a cross till dead.

But the thing about Jesus the Christ, God's own Son, part of the Divine Community, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is that he cannot be defeated and put to death. And because he cannot be defeated and put to death, his mission to save the world from its sinfulness cannot be defeated and put to death either. And that is what is at the heart of the first part of the passage that is our Second reading.

But then Paul jumped right to the result of that Good News, and that is that we are freed from the trap of living in sin. So congratulations, you are free!

What? You don't feel free? You still feel like a sinner? Yea, me too.

Let's think about it like this. God's grace is like falling in love. When you first meet that special someone, you think about them a lot, maybe obsess about them a lot. You want to call them, text them 10 times a day. Drop-in on them. Leave notes on their car or little gifts at their home. I'm old so I don't know what young

people do – maybe they Instagram them, or TicToc them, or Tweet them – yea don't correct me if I have that all wrong. I don't know anything about those forms of social media. The point is that when you have fallen in love, you want to do all these nice things for your beloved. And the opposite is also true, it is unconscionable that we would do anything to hurt or offend our beloved.

In that same way, Paul wrote that once we understand the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus, that we have been forgiven of our sinful past, then we ought to do our level best to live into that relationship to free ourselves from sin and bring honor and glory to God by living according to the example of Jesus Christ.

Easier said than done, isn't it?

You still feel like a sinner? Yea, me too.

Paul understood our dilemma. In Chapter 7 he wrote,

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul's rhetorical question at the beginning of this passage is, and I paraphrase, "So if God in Christ dispenses grace equivalent to human sin, and God's grace is a good thing, then shouldn't we sin more so that there will be more grace?" His response, "By no means!"

Having received the grace of God by faith, we ought to turn our backs on our sinful pasts, and living into our new lives as Christians saved by grace, we ought to turn away from sin going forward.

What that means for us, is that when we accept the gift of grace and understand what that truly means for us, then our lives ought to be changed, and like falling in love, we ought to do everything in our power to live into that new life in Christ, which includes:

- Bible study to learn the way of Christ,

- devotions to become better acquainted with God,
- fellowship with others who are just like us and need each other to be encouraged to continue to walk the narrow way, and
- worship, so that we might express our love

And when we do those aspects of the life of discipleship, those important spiritual disciplines, we are transformed, we are different than the rest of the general population and we become what God had intended from the beginning. We are

"as a light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

When we become that, a light to others, then we have made the move from mere worship, a one aspect disciple, to witness - the well-balanced, well-learned, well-lived disciple of Jesus Christ. That life and witness is attractive, and will draw others to it so that we can witness to Jesus Christ and his way, and how it has made all the difference for us.

"Yea, pastor, I hear ya, but I still feel like a sinner every day." Yea, me too. The best among us, struggle against sin every day. Being a disciple of Christ doesn't mean we are sinless, it means that sin no longer holds us back from doing what is right. Paul wrote it this way,

¹¹you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

And this is where the Holy Spirit comes in. When we do the spiritual disciplines I mentioned a moment ago, the Holy Spirit will guide us through our days, helping us make good decisions in each moment.

And even when we sin, we know that we have God's grace, and the Holy Spirit's help to get back up again, and begin anew. This is the daily conversion that Martin Luther often wrote about.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

It is great to be back at corporate worship. I hope and pray that we continue to make progress against the COVID-19 pandemic and find a vaccine soon so that life as we knew it before pandemic can return.

But worship, even corporate worship is only one aspect of the disciple's life. We can sing and pray, listen to sermons and go to bible studies all the day long, but if all those activities don't translate to real ongoing daily conversion, then I think we make a mockery of our Lord Jesus' death on the cross, and miss out on our opportunity to become more like him and give him glory by the living of our lives of discipleship.

Prayer

Grace-giving God, we thank you that through Christ our Lord, we have been forgiven, and more than forgiven, given a new opportunity each day, to love and serve you as you deserve. Move us from mere worship to witness that our purpose, to be a light for all people, may serve your desire that all people come to know your saving grace. We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen