

A Matter of Death and Life
Text: Romans 6:1-11
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“But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” Romans 6:8

Much to my amazement, I have learned in recent years that not everyone is captivated by, smitten with, or crazy about the Apostle Paul and his letters. I remember the occasion I had during a first year seminary class to describe my deep love for Paul's letter to the Romans. When I finished gushing over the importance and profundity of his words, a good friend looked at our professor and said, “You know what. Chris can have Paul. I'll stick with Jesus.” Perhaps a valid point! Even I must admit that the Apostle Paul, whose writings make up nearly half of the New Testament, was the kind of fervent evangelist that I might avoid or walk quickly past on the streets of Atlanta. To paraphrase the old saying, Paul was a believer, and I mean that in the worst kind of way. You know the type. The one who will take any opportunity to tell you all about how he got saved. The one who can't stop talking about God, for whom every single conversation seems to lead to his religious convictions.

When we come to this morning's section of his letter to Christians in the city of Rome, Paul has been opining at length about the lavishness of God's grace and its ability to overcome the sinfulness of humanity. Throughout the first part of Romans, Paul constantly reminds his readers of their unworthiness before God, and immediately follows with passionate statements of God's unconditional grace toward us. At the end of chapter five, Paul makes this point in a particularly dramatic way: “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

With this statement, Paul has gone too far. If the increase of sin (which Paul, as a good evangelist, has been railing against), causes grace to abound, then we are left with the question that Paul asks at the beginning of our text: Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? Now Paul seems to be trapped by his own logic. The question he poses is a good one, one that I have heard many, many times over the years. A modern day version of it goes something like this: If God is going to forgive me no matter what I do, why shouldn't I just do whatever I want? Or: I don't really worry about how I live now, because I can always ask God to forgive me later. And God has to do that, right?

The story goes that as W.C. Fields was on his deathbed reading the Bible, his physician asked him, “what are you doing?” He answered, “I'm looking for loopholes.”ⁱ

Should we continue in sin so that grace might abound?

We might expect Paul to chastise the Roman Christians for such an argument: "It's not nice for Christians to say something like that. We should all try not to sin." Instead, Paul says, you can't continue to sin because you have died to it. You have been buried with Christ. And suddenly, we find ourselves in very deep theological waters. The waters of baptism, to be specific.

Paul asks these Christians in Rome to consider what happened to them when they went down into the baptismal waters and came back up again. What changed? What difference did it make? And, according to Paul, what happened was that these women and men were buried with Christ and given the chance to live a new life right here and now.

Sisters and brothers, whatever else the Christian faith is about, it is certainly about the opportunity for new life. This is the message at the very heart of Paul's understanding of baptism. Dead people can't sin. In baptism you were buried with Christ. You're dead. You can't get resurrected to new life unless you die, so in baptism, you have died.

One can just imagine the Apostle Paul unleashing these harsh and graphic descriptions at First Presbyterian Church of Rome, just as the beautiful young child is politely sprinkled by the minister, careful to keep the carpet and the baptismal dress dry. And yet, there is something so meaningful and true about this powerful theology of baptism and the opportunity to begin again. There is a certain death that does occur in these moments of newness and renewal. At the end, there is a beginning.

Have you ever considered that baptism might just be the most countercultural and radical of all Christian actions? I know, it seems an odd selection for this distinction. I mean, if the baptisms that you have attended are anything like those that I have witnessed, they seem to be fairly controlled events, especially when you consider that we are often working with unpredictable infants! On the surface, the baptism ritual seems to be the quintessence of that old Presbyterian motto, "All things decently and in order." But I can assure you, that is not the case.

Take, for example, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. The gospel writer Mark tells us that when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn apart, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and a voice came from the sky.

When I was working as overnight host at Clifton Sanctuary ministries, I had the opportunity to attend some of the house meetings, led by Clifton's chaplain. I remember once when he asked the men who were guests at the shelter to give their testimony or faith story. One of the men broke an extended period of silence when he said; "I was baptized five years ago, just after I was released from eighteen months in prison. I walked in the door of Wheat Street Baptist Church because I didn't know where else to go and I remembered going there with my grandmother when I was a child. I walked in the door and the Spirit just took hold of me, swept me to the front of the church and that day I was baptized with water and the Holy Spirit. I heard the voice, I saw the dove. I was remade by the power of Jesus in that church."

Now, I know, that may be a bit much for Presbyterians, but consider the power of this simple ritual, the way in which it overturns the powers and principalities of this world. The radically generous and inclusive power of it.

How does the church witness to its unity and to the power of Christ's resurrection? Not with weapons of war or vast financial resources or ecclesiastical gatekeepers but with plain water and a simple ritual. When we are baptized, we join in the in-breaking kingdom and commit to live as if that kingdom were present among us, as indeed it is. The church, the body of baptized believers who belong to Christ, is the community that must envision God's future for the world.

It is hard to read this passage from Paul's pen without considering his own life story. Paul knew something about finding the way to life through the pain of death. On his way to Damascus, in search of more followers of Jesus to arrest and punish, something dramatic and transformative took place. He had an encounter with the Risen Christ, and nothing could ever be the same. He lost his sight, and when it returned Paul of Tarsus would never see anything the same again. The Book of Acts tells us that as soon as he regained his sight, even before he ate dinner, Paul was baptized. He was baptized into the death of Christ and left his old life behind. The angry, zealous, violent persecutor became an Apostle of Jesus Christ.

For Paul, and for the Christian faith ever since, this kind of transformation takes place in the act of baptism, through which we are separated from the power of sin and death and united to the power of resurrection. In our baptism, we leave behind our old lives of fear and shame and regret, and we embrace the future with confidence and hope. We die, and are raised to new life.

Have you ever had to die to become a Christian? I think I've seen it. In a prison cell, I have heard a woman say, "I just can't go on living this way. Something has to change." And, in time, it does.

Will Willimon, a United Methodist Bishop and the former Dean of Duke Chapel, tells the story of a Methodist church he served in South Carolina and a man who had come to his church in need of healing. "We had tried to help him," Willimon says. "He lived almost next door to our church. His yard was a disgrace. Broken-down cars. Dead washing machine (and dryer) on the front porch. He drank. Rumors were, he abused his wife and kids. We tried. Invited her to the United Church Women. Once we paid for the kids to go to church camp. Nothing. All our good efforts were for nothing.

A year or so later, members of the church were suddenly aware that his yard had changed. It was now neat. Clean. No major appliances in the yard. Hmm. When Willimon saw him downtown, he didn't recognize him at first. 'Tom, is that you?' he asked, after this well-dressed man had spoken to him. He had so radically changed.

What happened? 'I've been saved,' he said. 'From what?' 'From hell,' he announced. 'The hell of my life, the hell I'd put my family in. Born again. Fire baptized. No more alcohol. No more meanness.' I couldn't deny the miracle. 'Owe it all to that church,' he said. Then he named a church, one of those unattached, free-lance, fundamentalist,

narrow, fanatical, churches.

'Gosh, Tom, I wish our church could have helped you. That church is, well, a bit narrow.' Tom smiled. 'Don't feel bad, preacher. Most churches would not have had me. Your church offered me aspirin. I needed massive chemotherapy.'ⁱⁱ

Baptism, at its core, contains the power and the promise of new life for all people. And, according to Paul, the good news is that we don't have to wait for our physical death in order to experience resurrection. For, according to Paul, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might walk in newness of life. That is, new life that begins immediately, no need to wait until these bodies wear out. I am always concerned when I hear of churches or pastors whose entire message centers on the promise of eternal life after death. Such theology has been used to justify oppression, romanticize poverty, and defend adamant refusal to be involved in ministries of peace and justice in the world. No, the promise of new life in baptism is that it begins today, and again tomorrow, and next week. And in each moment where we decide between life and death.

Mary Oliver closes her remarkable poem, "When Death Comes" with these words:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it is over, I don't want to wonder

if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.ⁱⁱⁱ

I remember visiting Scotland the summer after graduating from college. The entire trip was a spiritually renewing and energizing experience for me, but the most important moment of the entire trip came when I was walking through the streets of Edinburgh and found a small postcard lying on the sidewalk. The front of the card was the name of a non-profit organization that I had never heard: ChristianAid.^{iv} On the back was one simple sentence that was the organization's motto: "We believe in life before death." I still have the card. What a powerful testament to the belief that Jesus Christ came into the world so that all of us might walk in newness of life in the here and now.

I am so proud to say that we have been baptizing a lot of babies at Morningside in recent months. Our calendar is full to overflowing with these joyous occasions. This has given us all the chance to reflect on the service of baptism a little more deeply. My favorite part of that service is the question that is always asked to the whole

congregation, and to the whole body of Christ that is gathered: “do you promise to guide and nurture the newly baptized by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and be a faithful member of his church?”^v When this question is asked, I love to look out over the congregation, at all of you, and think what a wonderful promise has just been made to this newly baptized person. I think of how this church has nurtured and guided, encouraged and loved, so many others. I think of how this church will teach this new member of God’s radically inclusive, barrier breaking, love. I think of how you will show her in word and deed that Christ calls us to be about ministries of compassion and justice in our community and beyond. I think of how you will share your life with this person, how you will teach her in Sunday School and Bible School, how you will guide him through difficult days, and share the last cup of punch at fellowship hour. Each time, I find myself so grateful that this person now belongs to us all, and not to the powers of this world.

Have any of you ever had to die to become a Christian? Paul did. He understood firsthand the death and loss associated with transformation. And so he wrote to the Christians in Rome:

“Should we continue in our old, predictable, secure, what we like to call ‘life’? By no means! Don’t you know that you have left that way of living behind in the waters of baptism? Don’t you know that you have died and been raised again?”

It is a matter of death and life.

This was Paul’s story. This is the church’s story. This is our story. Given the freedom and the grace to begin again, and again, and again. So, let’s get started.

ⁱ Story printed in William P. Brown, ed. *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. p. ix

ⁱⁱ I heard Bishop Willimon tell this story in Duke Chapel in 2003. I am sure it has been printed as well.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

^{iv} For more information, see www.christian-aid.org.uk.

^v From the *Book of Common Worship*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993. p. 406.