

June 22, 2008

Romans 6:1b-11

Romans 6:1 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?

2 By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 Therefore 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.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

6 We 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.

7 For whoever has died is freed from sin.

8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

10 The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

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

Matthew 10:24 "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master;

25 it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

26 "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

27 What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

28 Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted.

31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

32 "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven;

33 but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

36 and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;  
38 and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.  
39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Sermon: Lost and Found

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I give me words that I may speak give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand. Amen.

It really is nice to be standing up here once again. It has been a very interesting couple of weeks.

I had never had surgery before, and I was a little bit afraid of the idea. The most difficult thing about all of this is not having my right arm. I never realized just how much I use my right arm until I was without the use of it.

Doing everything with one arm is a challenge to begin with, and to have only my left arm, being a righty has really opened my eyes. When we hear people talk about a valued assistant as a right hand, there really is something to that. That makes a much more sense to me now than it ever did before.

I had this running around in my head as I read today scriptures. Today's gospel reading is probably one of the more challenging of all of the readings in the lectionary cycle. What in heaven's name is Jesus saying in this scripture? None of this sounds very good.

Mothers against daughters, fathers against sons, no peace but a sword, these do not seem like hopeful words to us. These are challenging words indeed.

What was Jesus trying to get across here? Does he want mothers and daughters fighting, fathers and sons to be at odds? Is he suggesting that we should have war, that war is a good thing.

Fortunately this scripture is not the only one for today, we do have Paul,

Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

OK, so this isn't a big help either.

Baptized into his death, crucified along with him, this is also a scripture that we might wish to avoid. I'd much rather talk about some of the happy scriptures rather and avoid death and crucifixion.

So what's going on here? How do we make sense out of scriptures that are so challenging for us?

Maybe we're supposed to be morose, thinking about death, fighting amongst ourselves mother and daughter father and son, thinking about war. Perhaps this is the message that Jesus has for us: that we're in a world of turmoil and trouble, division and warfare. Just get used to it. Just accept it.

Is Jesus' telling us that we should just embrace all of this? We should accept a vision of the world which includes division, and violence against one another?

I do think Paul can help us, he asks, should we keep sinning so that grace may abound?

Jesus has promised us that even our sins are not enough to keep us from God. Jesus tells us of the God of grace.

It is worth saying a little something about grace, because grace is such an essential part of our faith. Grace and forgiveness go hand in hand.

There's a great scene in the movie *City Slickers*, a movie about three New Yorkers who go out on the range to be cowboys as a vacation. Phil goes into his tent and tells the character played by Billy Crystal that he does not know what his life means, he has made many mistakes, was he really good enough?

Billy Crystal reminds him of when they were children playing stickball, when a ball would get stuck in a tree or wound up someplace it could not be retrieved, they would call a do over. Billy Crystal tells Phil that life is much the same, when we make mistakes, when we seem to fail, we are allowed to begin again. That is in essence what grace is as God offers it to us.

Grace is kind of like a do over.

Which of us is perfect? which of us is able to do everything exactly right?

I don't know about you, but I have certainly not been perfect in my life. I have made choices that did not turn out so well; I've done things I wish I had not done. But one of the great gifts in life is that we get to start again. We get a do over.

Any of you who have ever gone golfing have probably taken a few do overs yourselves. Most golfers are not like Tiger Woods getting down the fairway more times than not. Most golfers have those times when they get up to the tee and hit the ball about 2 feet. If you are with friends, your playing partners might say, "try again." That is the gracious thing to do.

Grace is a kind of forgiveness that is offered even when it has not been asked for, even when it is not deserved. When we make mistakes we generally feel we should be held accountable for those mistakes.

I saw a great saying: To err is human. To blame it on someone else is politics. But politics is not what God's about; God is about grace.

When grace is offered, the slate is cleared and we are free to start again. This is what Jesus offers us: grace in abundance.

This is at least some good news. When we make mistakes, when we fail, when we sin against God, we are offered forgiveness and grace. That is particularly good news. But I do think Paul is onto something.

Paul says do we then keep on sinning because we know that grace abounds? Should we simply keep going and doing the same things believing that we will get grace offered regardless of what we do?

I've said before that I am a fan of Shakespeare. I think that Shakespeare has a lot to tell us about human nature and the way that human beings function. He seems to have the insight into many of the problems that humans face.

In the play Macbeth, Shakespeare shows the problem of a person who knows what is wrong and continues to do it anyway. When Macbeth hears that he is to be the king, he will stop at nothing to achieve his goal. But he also understands that the murders he commits are wrong and yet he does them anyway.

Somehow Mac Beth is able to convince himself that the ends justify the means. Even though he knows what he's doing is wrong he continues to do it anyway, and herein lies his destruction. He has disregarded the laws of God and of man, even when he knows what he's doing.

Paul asks: Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?  
By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

How can we find our way to God if we do what is wrong and continue to do it expecting that God will just wipe the slate clean it over and over again?

What Paul says here is that we may need a fundamental change in our lives; we need to allow a kind of death that creates a new clean slate, and once that has happened we are expected to change. We can just go on doing the same old things over and over again once we know they're wrong.

When Phil, in the movie City Slickers, comes to terms with his own failures and regrets, he is able to see new possibilities for what his life might be, and he commits himself to

doing better in the future. He does not plan to return to his life and make the same mistakes again.

We're facing many of these same questions and our world today. Now that we understand in clear terms what it means to pollute our environment should we keep doing it? Now that we see the cost of an ill conceived war should we continue it?

There is one definition of insanity that I think is quite fitting: insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

The life we have been given is a difficult challenge. There are many up's and downs, and we all have our failings, mistakes and regrets to live with, but why should those things be the whole story? Jesus tells us of a whole different way.

Paul says that if we are willing to die to our old self we will also be lifted up in the same resurrection the Jesus had. This is perhaps the hardest thing to deal with in today's scriptures. Letting go, giving up our whole lives. Finding new possibilities and new life in Christ are the great gift we are offered. This is also very difficult.

And how do we receive that gift? How do we find that hope? How do we find the transformative power of Christ and our lives? We have but to ask. We have only to come to God accepting our shortcomings and seeking the grace that has been freely offered to us. All of us get lost in this life, but finding Christ and the love offered to us by God is what we need.

Once we make that commitment to Jesus we still must live in this world, a world governed by the passions of the flesh, a world where people argue and fight, make wars and hurt one another. We live in a world where mother and daughter may be at odds, where father and son may disagree, a world where the sword takes a prominent place in our lives.

There are days when it almost seems like it would be better to follow the old adage if you can't beat them join them. Why don't we just be like those who rule the culture, let's be greedy, let's be selfish, let's be shallow, let's use violence to make our selves feel safe, why not? that's what people seem to expect in this world. Being kind, patient, and loving seem to get us nowhere; why bother with any of that?

Jesus tells us in the scripture today that things aren't going to be easy when we choose to follow him. Just because we follow him does not mean that everything is going to be sunshine and roses. Yes we do have the assurance of the resurrection, yes we do have the power of God's love, yes we are promised grace in abundance, but the world won't care a whit for that.

I think a lot of people fall away from the gospel for this very reason, because the world is difficult, because wars do occur, because divisions are present in the world around us; living the gospel is not easy.

And that is why even though Jesus, the Prince of Peace, is present here does not assure peace, he says it will bring a sword. Even though he is a reconciler, following him will make us targets. We will see division all around us even, perhaps especially if we are following in Christ's way.

Maybe it would be easier some days to just give an to the world around us and say: if you can't beat them join em, but that would be to give up Christ, to give up the new life we're promised, in effect it would be like getting rid of our right arm. Living without Christ for me would just be like not being able a function at all.

That would be to would be to give up the one thing that makes putting up with all the problems of this world worthwhile, the knowledge that we are in fact loved, loved with a love that knows no boundaries, loved with the love that offers us forgiveness and grace, a clean slate and a chance for a do over.

I do know about you but I really can't give that up, it really would be like going and going throughout life without a right arm, and I've had enough of that already.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.