

WORSHIP MESSAGE – JUNE 21- ALIVE WITH CHRIST – JOHN DUNTLEY

Today's scripture provides us with a prescription for overcoming our sins by placing ourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus with our faith. While this seems a simple prescription, it is far more detailed than it first appears.

A couple of weeks ago Pastor Dan delivered a message in which he paused to wonder how Jesus came up with his plan for spreading Christianity through a small group of twelve disciples who at times even doubted his teaching as much as many others did. There was not a business plan thought out with goals and objectives or training.

Last week, Darci, in her message from Mathew 10, described the twelve Apostles being instructed to set out across the biblical world to share the Good News and to heal illnesses as Jesus had done, without any money, without extra clothing, without a planned place to eat or sleep, with an expectation to be jailed and told to depend entirely on their faith and the Spirit.

Paul Leads the Way

This week's scripture from Romans 6:1-11 dives deeply into Paul's well developed and studied premise on the absolution of sin through total faith in Christ. Paul was the Apostle that took the loose direction that Jesus gave to the disciples very seriously and made it his life's work, relentlessly. Paul, also known by his Hebrew name, Saul of Tarsus, was a common tent maker and a devout Pharisee who actually participated in the persecution early Christian followers until Jesus encountered him on a road to Damascus, blinded him for three days and converted his beliefs very solidly. He began using his Roman name Paul and set out to structure, document and lead the most diligent Christian missionary work in history. Paul, as other Apostles, began to travel their world sharing Jesus's teaching focusing first on the conversion of Jews to Christianity and later seeking to convert Gentiles. They had an organized approach, traveling city by city.

The Book of Romans was written late in Paul's missionary life, around 57 AD, as a letter to the forming church in Rome. We are familiar with many of Paul's letters that were sent to churches across the Eastern Mediterranean region, both in Greece and Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. Paul's letters are very familiar because they became 13 of the Epistles of the New Testament; 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, were letters to churches in cities in Greece, while Colossians, Galatians, Ephesians were letters to churches in Asia Minor and then letters to Timothy, Titus, Philemon, are short instructions from Paul to his trusted assistants. He was so organized that that he had others leading and helping in his missionary efforts, often writing his letters to the churches in various cities as a team or frequently writing them from prison due to his radical preaching.

Grace Assured

Romans was the letter that Paul composed to reach the church in Rome. It was his chance to convince the church in Rome of righteous Christian doctrine and to potentially gain favor to spread the Good News further west along the Mediterranean to Spain. It describes many of the established, thought-out practices and theology of the Christian church that Paul and others developed from their missionary travels to many of the cities where he had spent time. These early Apostles were seeking to come to terms with some of the differences that Christianity had with their own earlier Jewish faith. They, of course, found the Ten Commandments as essential to a devout life, but trying to follow the 613 Jewish laws they felt was impossible for people to achieve. They felt it was impossible for anyone NOT to be a sinner, even with the Ten Commandments alone, everyone could become a sinner.

In a brief summary of their early thinking, everyone is a sinner. In order to be forgiven of those sins, Jesus died on the cross for all the sins of humankind. By His death and resurrection he takes with him the sins of the world so that all those that believe in Jesus are also forgiven of sin. To become a faithful believer in Jesus, a person needs to be baptized, as the baptism washes away all of those sins and faithful belief in Jesus carries that through life and on to resurrection after death. Romans 6:3-4 ³ *"For surely you know that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into union with his death. ⁴ By our baptism, then, we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life."*

That is the basic theology that Paul preached to his church communities, that he and other Apostles share and that he described in the letter to the Romans. He was interested in bringing true Christian teachings to the church in Rome which had drifted away from its Jewish roots in part because Emperor Claudius, tired of the infighting between Jews and early Christian Gentiles, had expelled all Jews from Rome. Across the Roman empire, life was not easy for many. Roman rule essentially flourished on conquering regions, ruling with an iron hand, enslaving or taxing common people, making life less than easy. Paul and other early missionaries brought the idea of truth, equality and hope for the future. The status markers of Roman rule would be replaced by inclusiveness and caring for others.

After the death of Claudius, Paul saw the opportunity to reunite Christian Gentiles and Jews with a spirit of unity and equality for every person and diminish the tribalism that had grown. This work was not easy, and his efforts ended up finding Paul in Roman prisons multiple times and delayed his interest in spreading Christian teaching to the west, but nevertheless, his teachings and letters endured.

Guiding the Modern Church

Martin Luther's intense study of Romans in 1517 provided the theological framework for the Protestant Reformation and the birth of the Lutheran church. Our own John Wesley, while listening to a reading of Luther's preface to the Commentary on Romans in 1738, experienced a profound spiritual awakening, which launched the Methodist movement. Wesley found Romans to be fundamental to the understanding of Christianity. He believed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the greatest outpouring of God's love and mercy upon the world. The marvelous benefit to humanity through the person of Christ is the cancellation of sin and guilt before God. Wesley believed this divine grace turns us and draws us toward God, pardoning and renewing us through the gift of faith.

Truly, those inspired letters written by Paul many hundreds of years before, sparked these Christian leaders from the 16th Century to the 18th Century and still through today. The process of asking the Apostles to go out and build Christian communities of churches actually worked thanks to the tireless efforts of leaders like Paul. Many of the teachings and writings of Paul and others remain as a foundation for our modern church to this day.

Much of that thinking still lives in a form of translation with current church practices and yet we may not accentuate the washing away of sin in our baptism ritual in quite the same tone as the first Century church did. The United Methodist Church's official statement on baptism states, *"In baptism, we reject the power of sin and begin our journey as disciples of Jesus Christ. Through the waters of baptism, we are cleansed of our sin and born into a new way of living. Whether an infant or adult, this is just the beginning."*

The formula written down by Paul of everyday Christians receiving grace and absolution of all sin by accepting and believing in Christ through baptism and then through faith is a formula of hope and promise. The amazing grace that is offered to anyone through the simple act of belief and faith remains vibrant many thousand years after its formulation. It is up to each of us to keep the faith of that formula. It does not give us a free pass to sin with grace assured through our faith in Christ. The first verse of today's scripture Paul is asking how should we act, Romans 6:1 *"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?"* Of course, Paul retorts *"Far from it"* and the method of living a sin free life focuses on our trust and faith in Christ who died for our sins, (Romans 6:11) *"¹¹ So you too, consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."*

Keeping the Faith

As we practice our faith in so many ways, praying for those in need, helping with our mission of the month efforts, caring for the homebound, supporting the food cupboard and many other efforts, we are in many ways, "alive to God in Christ Jesus." We are practicing our faith and doing so with joy, not really considering that we are achieving grace for our sins. Hopefully, what moves us and builds our faith is our practice of caring, loving and building equality for all as Jesus taught. While we all may be sinners in some sense; putting importance on possessions, speaking an unkind word, neglecting someone we could help, hopefully it is our desire to be "alive with Christ" that corrects our missteps and not the notion of assurance that our sins are always forgiven. It can be an unsettling concept. We should always remember, it is the focus on our faith, not on our errors, that brings us to live as we are "alive with Christ".

AMEN