

Today is our second installment in our preaching series on Paul's letter to the Romans. As Father Perry explained last week, Paul had not yet visited the early Christians in Rome when he wrote this letter to them. The time was probably somewhere around 54 to 59 AD. In other words, about 20 to 25 years after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The word of the Messiah had spread, even to the streets of Rome.

Most scholars agree that contained within Paul's letter to the Romans is a concise outline of the Christian faith. Paul is in essence the architect of the Christian faith as we know it today. In chapters 1 through 5 of his letter to the Romans he summarizes and defines the meaning of the gospel: the good news of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah born to us, champion of the poor, the lost, the last, and the least; crucified at the hands of injustice, but then resurrected from the grave to rise triumphant over the forces of evil and the finality of death.

Then in chapters 6 through 8 he explains how to live out the meaning of the gospel, how acceptance of the gospel should change our lives so that we become new people, very much unlike the people we had been before. So that brings us to today's selection of verses 1 through 11 of chapter 6.

Good enough, so far. But, I have to confess that I've often found Paul to be difficult. In some ways he is to me impenetrable. He can be so dense and convoluted that I lose his train of thought entirely. Sometimes he's not satisfied with making a point once. No, he has to rephrase it a couple or three times to make his point. This, I find, can get pretty tedious. I want to say, "I get it, Paul. Skip on down."

However, in some places, as in his letter to the Corinthians, he can be beautifully poetic and lyrical: “Love is patient, love is kind, love does not boast. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

You can’t hear these words without being moved by the sheer poetry of them, the deep connection with human emotion and hope.

In this sixth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, we encounter quite a bit of metaphor and symbolism. To begin with, earlier in his letter, Paul had explained about the unlimited grace of God available to all. Jesus came to us to introduce us to a personal God, a god we can approach on a one-on-one basis. Punishment for sins does not cascade down from one generation to another. (You may recall the gospel passage when the disciples asked what sin the blind man’s parents must have committed in order for the son to be bearing this punishment.) No, Paul explained, God’s grace is available to us all, just for the asking, and we can be forgiven our sins merely by asking. The zero-sum game of sin and damnation has been dismantled by the life and teachings of Jesus. Mercy is available to all, just for the asking.

However, apparently Paul had heard that some of the new converts to the way of Jesus took the universality and abundance of God’s grace to mean that they could live any kind of licentious, wayward life they wanted to and yet still be forgiven anything if they confessed their transgressions. They kind of thought that believing in this new interpretation of God – a personal god involved in our lives and full of abundant, endless love – gave them a “get out of jail free” card for whatever they wanted to do. Sort of like having diplomatic license plates on your car: you can park where you like, you can drive as fast as you want to. What the heck? You’ve got immunity.

Paul, the disciplinarian, of course wants to quash this idea in a hurry. So he appeals to the better side of the new followers of Christ. He says, “Yeah, but why would you want to, when you can live in true freedom in your new faith instead of in slavery to the old ways?” He talks a bit about sin: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” he asks. In other words, should we be bad in order to demonstrate how forgiving the grace of God can be? (That’s the get out of jail free card.) But he asks, “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

What might Paul be talking about when he talks about “sin”? I think it’s more than something like, “I once shoplifted in the market, but now I won’t do that anymore.” I think to Paul “sin” means the “half-living” of one’s belief – the going through the motions, the being only partially involved, of being a consumer of a product called “religion.” Once you’ve had the conversion experience that Paul had on the road to Damascus, you can understand that he’s not “half-living” anything anymore. He’s not even just partially involved. He is fully, totally, involved. This is why he uses such bold black/white language like “death” and “life.” To him it is that critical. To Paul this new life is dramatically different from the other lives that one could choose to live. We have only to look at his life: conversion from chief prosecutor to primary advocator and apostle in a matter of only a few days.

We’ve got to admit that Paul is using some pretty dramatic – maybe melodramatic – language here in this portion of his letter to the Romans. “Baptized into his death,” “buried with him,” “our old self was crucified with him,” and so on.

It’s hard to take this stuff literally, and I think that Paul meant to be metaphorical and dramatic. Such strong terms encourage us to think in strong

ways. How am I to die to the things I don't particularly like about myself or my life, and "walk in the newness" of a life I'd rather have? If I'm a smoker, how can I decide not to buy that next pack of cigarettes? If I'm a little too fond of my adult drink in the evening, how can I decide to reach for the coffee pot instead? If I realize I'm a bit of a gossip, how can I hold my tongue and say nothing instead, even if I have something really juicy to reveal? If someone I know is abusive to someone, how can I summon the guts to stand up for justice?

That small voice of justice, compassion, mercy, and self-control is within us, whispering to us in the dark. Jesus told his disciples, "what I say to you in the darkness, tell in the light." He speaks to us. What is whispered we should proclaim from the housetops. We should not fear to be bold. As baptized Christians, it is our duty to be bold.

When Paul tells us we were baptized into the death of Jesus the Christ, he's talking about what is really going on once we declared our belief and faith in Jesus. "Think of it as dying and then living again," he explains. The imagery and machinery behind your baptism is that you drowned and died as we covered you with water. It was like descending into the grave and being covered with impenetrable earth. You see nothing; you hear nothing. But then suddenly we pulled you back up, into the bright and beautiful light of day. You can hear the birds singing and the voices of friends and loved ones again. You see the trees and clouds above, the vibrant colors of the world. Suddenly you are alive again. This, Paul says, is what Jesus went through in his death and resurrection. And now you share this experience of resurrection, your own escape from death into life. How can you remain unchanged? How can you not emerge from this experience a new person with new values and new ways of seeing the world?

But we also acknowledge in the rite of baptism our frailties. We promise only “with God’s help.” In the Gospel for today Jesus assures us that God sees the fall of even the sparrow. How much more concerned with our fall might God therefore be? Jesus assures us that help is on the way. Paul tells us that we cannot receive the mercies of God unless we first accept them. It’s a partnership between God the Father and us. It requires two open hands. One to give. The other to receive.

“If we die with Christ,” Paul says, “we will also live with him.” If we can say no to one thing, maybe we can yes to another.

We’ve been told, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” It’s really up to us. Margaret Mead observed that we should never doubt that the world can be changed by a few dedicated people. Indeed, she says, that’s the way it’s always been.

It doesn’t count if all we do is pretend to be what we want to be. We must in the words of Paul “walk in the newness of life.” This is a full-time occupation.

I think the take-away from Chapter 6 of Paul’s letter to the Romans is this:

If I have declared that I believe in Jesus Christ, the only son of God, begotten not made, then I will be dead to cynicism, political partisanship, and an overwhelming sense of entitlement when I think of those who have less than I do, or who hold different points of view from mine. I will be dead to closely guarding my resources, dead to fearing to risk something of my talents, my time, and my treasure. I will be dead to pessimism and a feeling that the good times are behind us, never to return. I will be dead to the conviction that everything I need to know I’ve already learned, and therefore no one has anything new or worthwhile to teach

me. I will be dead to the fear of approaching people I do not know and offering them a smile and a heart-felt “hello, glad to meet you.”

If I have declared that I believe in Jesus Christ, the only son of God, begotten not made, then I will be alive to the poor, the destitute, the homeless, the disenfranchised around me. I will be alive to the agents of mercy and relief in my city and community, and I will support them in their good works of mercy and comfort. I will be alive to the possibilities of mission open to this faith community of Grace Church, situated here in a run-down neighborhood of immigrants and blue collar workers. I will be alive to the realization that those who are simply trying to scratch out a better life for their children and their families are very much like my great-grandparents, whose hard work is my inheritance today. I will be alive to the possibility that true faith can be seen in many faces and many expressions. I will be alive to lovingly accepting all who come in faith, alive in the acknowledgement that we all are pilgrims on a great journey. I will be alive to the discomfort of the life of a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, who himself perhaps was never comfortable.

As baptized Christians, it is a new life that we seek. A new life to which we are called. We’ve probably seen parts of it now and then, a glimpse among the clouds of everyday life. The old life bogs us down, because so much of it requires our attention just to get by: do the shopping, pay the bills, return the phone calls. But under all that, beyond all that, is the new life that we strive to live. To find the time to be merciful, to be kind, to be really compassionate to those who need it. To die to the old and rise alive to the new is the promise of the gospel, the good news.

Our prayer today is that we may see and feel the new life that exists just beyond the ordinary in our lives. The extra sense and understanding of our mission

and possibility in this place and in this time. We can pray that we might die to habit and be alive to new things. Die to pessimism and be reborn to optimism. We can pray that we might die to prejudice of all kinds, blatant and subtle, and begin to love all children of God, as difficult or awkward as that may be. May we all, good and loving Lord, learn to live and walk in the newness of life.

Amen.

Preached by Gregg Wickham, LLP
at Grace Episcopal Church, Fairfield, CA
June 25, 2017