

BETWEEN DESIRE AND CEMETERIES

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
June 21, 2020

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1-11

This morning I am continuing my series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Romans, drawing on Fleming Rutledge's book, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*.

The playwright, Tennessee Williams, lived on St. Peter Street in New Orleans while he was writing his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The story goes that he had been tinkering with various titles for the play when he realized that he was located between two streetcar lines. One streetcar went in one direction to Desire, the other went the other way to Cemeteries. This, Tennessee Williams thought, was a perfect metaphor for the human condition: that we live, all of us, caught between Desire and Cemeteries, between Sin (desire) and Death (cemeteries).

Paul, in Romans, says something similar when he states that, "The wages of sin is death."¹ Indeed, a good deal of the first half of Paul's letter is spent showing how Sin and Death go together. Paul wants us to understand that death is not simply a natural process, but a Power linked with Sin to deal destruction to the human race. "The devices and desires of our own hearts" imprison us in Sin, and "the wages of sin is death."

The pastor of a church neighboring the one I served in New York City had the habit of capitalizing the words Sin and Death in her sermons. The purpose of doing this, she said, was to show that Sin and Death are not just components of human life, but Powers —also capitalized—that rule over us. That is the way Paul understands the situation. In our text for today he uses words that indicate their sovereign sway. Sin *reigns*, Paul says; Death *has dominion*; we are *enslaved by* Sin. I think the point this language makes is that Sin is not something we can choose to avoid, any more than we can choose not to die. We are trapped between Desire and Cemeteries.

The apostle Paul is poorly understood in many of our churches. His letters are often difficult to understand and we need persistence and help to read him. There is a sort of "aha moment" for people in understanding Paul and that is something only the Holy Spirit can control. All the preacher can do is to bear witness, to say "look in this direction!" Look this morning in the direction of what Paul says about Sin and Death. In chapter 6 he leaves behind the long descriptions of how we have fallen into the grip of Sin and he launches into a kind of rhapsody about what happens to Christians when we are baptized.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were

¹ Romans 6:23.

buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life...²

This is audacious and original teaching. We wouldn't understand any of this if we had only the Gospels. The New Testament letters are essential for filling out the meaning of the stories about Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. When Paul says that those who are baptized into Christ are crucified with Christ, he means that all the benefits of his death become ours because of the relationship Christ establishes with us. Paul says that our sinful selves are put to death on the Cross so that we are no longer slaves to Sin. Think about your own baptism, and the baptisms of your children and others whom you love. In baptism the Holy Spirit acts to unite the person to Christ in his death and therefore to the death of the sinful self. It is a powerful message. All the things we find upsetting about ourselves, the habits we cannot seem to shake, the personality traits that get us in trouble, the secret obsessions and perversions that we struggle to hide even from ourselves—all of these have been put to death:

Our old self has been crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. . . .³

Paul knew that there was a danger in this teaching, and that danger will continue to cause people to resist Paul's teaching of the gospel as long as it is preached. We are frightened to death of the message of God's grace. In order to understand this fright, we need to go back a bit in Romans. In the section just before this one, Paul explains that "Christ's act of righteousness [on the Cross] leads to acquittal and life for all human beings"; and then he says the even more dangerous thing: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."⁴ Paul knew that some people would misunderstand this and would say, "Well! If grace abounds all the more when sin increases, bring it on! Let's sin all the more!" But this is indeed to misunderstand totally, as Paul says in today's text: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!" We need to give a lot of emphasis to that *By no means!* Paul's tone is more like this: "No, no, no! If you think that, you have gotten the whole thing wrong! You aren't even close! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

"How can we grasp this? If you've been living in a prison and are set free, would you want to go back to it? If you conquer a bad habit, would you want to take it up again? But that doesn't really work, does it? It is well known; we *do* go back to bad habits, more often than not. People who lose weight gain it back. Recovering alcoholics fall off the wagon. People who have committed adultery once find it easier to do it the second time. We say "never again" to genocide, and just look at what is happening. These things occur constantly. The fact that this is so is evidence of the power of Sin, which "reigns in death."⁵ It is precisely this fact, that Sin has such a grip on us, that points to the Crucifixion of our Lord:

Our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

² Romans 6:1-4.

³ Romans 6:6.

⁴ Romans 5:20.

⁵ Romans 5:21.

But again: what are we to make of the fact that we slip back into Sin so frequently? That may be, Paul says, but Sin no longer determines us. It no longer rules our lives in the same total way. In our baptisms something objective has happened, something that comes to us from outside ourselves, and as we grow into the baptismal life, we more and more recognize how we can appropriate this great truth:

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

Union with Christ! United with him in his death, united with him in the resurrection of the dead. In other religious systems, in Gnostic systems, the religious elite are supposed to do this for themselves. We seek after union with the divine and if we get it right, we find enlightenment, or the higher consciousness, or some other sort of oneness with the divine. The Christian story is the opposite of this. We could do nothing for ourselves, religiously or otherwise, because the iron grip of Sin and Death separated us from God by such a chasm that there was no hope for us. God bridged that gap in his own person. It is in our new identity with him that we find our future. This news is so incomparable that Paul is seized by its joy. He says in several different ways, as if he can't ever tire of saying it:

We have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we shall be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . .⁶

We have died with Christ,
we believe that we shall also live with him.⁷

So this unity with our Lord Jesus is something that exists in real lives and cannot be defeated by Sin. Our union with him is something that God has done, and therefore there is nothing we can do to undo it, because he is stronger than Sin, stronger than Death. He has shown this in the Resurrection of Christ from the dead:

Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.⁸

This breathtaking declaration of deliverance for us makes all the difference in the world. Indeed it is a new world, not anything like the old one. We have a new power over Sin now. We can live as new people. That's what Paul means when he says, by no means! You aren't going to sin more so that grace may abound; "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" And he makes this passionate appeal:

No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.⁹

⁶ Romans 6:5.

⁷ Romans 6:8.

⁸ Romans 6:9-11.

⁹ Romans 6:13-14.

“Bring your members [all the constituent parts of your self] to God as instruments of righteousness.” Someone said Paul’s ethical teaching can be summarized in these words: “Become what you already are!” You already are an instrument of God’s righteousness because he has made you that way, by uniting you with Christ in your baptism. Now you can actually be an instrument of God’s righteousness! You can act like one! What liberation!

There is a paradox here, however, that nothing I can say will remove in this life. The paradox must remain until the Last Day. In this life we remain, as Martin Luther put it, saints and sinners simultaneously (*simul peccator et iustus*). We are sinners, but everything has changed because we are now justified sinners. We are sinners not only declared righteous but actually on our way to being made righteous. I spoke about this last Sunday; it is God who does the making righteous. Only God can do this work. He has already done it, in the death and Resurrection of Christ. We are assimilated into his Cross, into his risen life.

Tennessee Williams died a very sad death. He died alone in the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. The autopsy disclosed that something had lodged in his throat; he had choked to death, with no one to assist him. Drugs may have been involved; alcohol may have been involved. He was certainly not a model citizen, nor was he a Christian in the conventional sense. It might be easy to dismiss him as an unreformed sinner. But there is more to the story. Williams owned and lived in a house on Toulouse Street in New Orleans, but his first choice of a house to buy had been a large one at the corner of Orleans and Dauphine. The reason he wanted it was that the upper windows afforded a view of the statue of Christ behind the St. Louis Cathedral. Christ is lifting his hands in blessing, and at night the spotlights cast a shadow much larger than the statue itself, making the statue’s embrace seem universal. Tennessee Williams said that it seemed to him as if Christ was comforting the suffering world and it gave him a sense of peace to look at it.

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah “would not break a bruised reed.”¹⁰ If we think Tennessee Williams died beyond the reach of Christ’s embrace, we deny our Lord his ultimate victory. All of us will die as sinners, but Paul promises: “Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” Sin will have no dominion over you, and death shall have no dominion.

It is true that some of us bruised reeds are more bruised than others. I know I have thought of what a bruised reed I am. Drugs, drink, and debauchery may not be my particular temptations, but I too am caught between Desire and Cemeteries. I too will die as a sinner. But I will die as a baptized sinner, a justified sinner, a sinner united to Christ not by my “spirituality” but by his prior action on my behalf.

The gospel comes to each one of us here this morning with all its original power. The death and Resurrection of Christ was not something that was over and done with long ago. It is present in all its majestic force this very day, for the Word of God is living and active, creating new lives and new hope and new victories wherever it is heard.

¹⁰ Isaiah 42:3.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

May you know that blessed assurance, and live and serve in the newness it affords you today and every day.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.