

A Sermon for the
6th Sunday after Pentecost
preached by the Rev. James E. Luedeke
on June 22, 2008
Texts: Romans 6:1b-14
Matthew 10:24-39

“What then are we to say? 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? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? 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. 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. 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. But if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that 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.” Romans 6:1b-11

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 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. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; your are of more value than many sparrows.” Matthew 10:26-31

This is the gospel that we preach. That even though we have absolutely no basis for believing we deserve it, no ability to earn it, God loves us unconditionally and unchangingly, and out of this unfathomable grace, adopts us all as his beloved children, and establishes a relationship with us by which to love and care for us. This steadfast love and undeserved grace is a gift. free and abundant. And the evidence of the reality of it is to be seen in the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his story we see God’s grace and unconditional love in action, and by faith in him can we know the fullness of God’s good news for ourselves. Love, forgiveness, new beginnings, freely given. We call it grace, the gospel. And we find it scandalous.

Who can trust something that is given freely, unconditionally? Haven’t we all been well taught to be skeptical of any offer that seems too good to be true? It’s the scandalous nature of this gospel of grace that was the greatest struggle Paul encountered in his career. The idea of God giving his love and grace freely caused problems for Paul in Galatia, in Corinth, and now, as

he writes a letter to introduce himself to the Christians in Rome, he chooses to address the scandal head on by voicing and then answering one of the chief questions raised about this gospel of grace he preaches. “What then are we to say?,” he asks in the letter to the Romans. Should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound? This was particularly the scandal the gospel caused in Corinth where Paul’s message about the free gift, about the freedom bestowed by the forgiveness given in Jesus’ crucifixion, led many to figure that this meant freedom to do whatever they want. It shouldn’t matter what we do, God’s grace is going to cover it, right? To which Paul responded the same way he does to this rhetorical question in Romans, “Absolutely not!” God’s free gift of grace and the freedom that forgiveness brings the Christian, is not license to do whatever one pleases, rather, it brings a special new responsibility to live in accord with, and obedient to, the love, compassion and mercy God has shown us.

But the scandal of the “free gift” did not end there, at Rome, it continued down through the history of the church and to our own time. It’s just as difficult for us to accept the gospel message today as it was for people hearing it in Paul’s time. We are the culture that made personal success and achievement a core value. We are the culture of rugged individualism, merit and achievement is king, we adore the stories of the those who lift themselves up from the most difficult circumstances, those who, from the most meager beginnings, become high achievers, become great. Such people earn and deserve everything they get. In the media we applaud and extol those kinds of stories. On the morning shows this week they were providing another one. A young man who immigrated with his family from Poland just five years ago. When he arrived here he knew no English, yet in five years he learned English, excelled in high school, and now, the biggest highlight of the story, has been accepted into every one of the Ivy league universities. What an amazing achievement. What an amazing story.

We love those rags to riches, overcoming great odds, underdog stories. We love them in our movies, our books, our sporting events. That’s what made the story of Tiger Woods so big last weekend. Merit and achievement, that’s what we see as the foundation on which our society operates, our schools, our businesses, our arts and entertainment. So it can be a real cognitive dissonance, something that clashes with the most fundamental things we believe, when we turn to that segment of our lives we call spirituality, or religion, or faith, and hear that none of that applies here. The meritocracy has no place in the gospel. Keeping score, piling up merits and achievements, does not apply here.

That was the very first part of Paul’s argument for the free gift of the gospel. We all fall short, none of us can do enough to earn it. So God decided to extend his love to us, to create a new relationship with us, as a gift, free, pure grace. And it was in Jesus Christ that the gift of grace was embodied and revealed to the world. Hold on to him, have faith in him, and the gift is yours. What good news. But what a scandal to us. To give up this merit based life is hard, it takes control of things out of our hands. We have a lot of fear of not being in control. We look to our achievements to define who we are, to establish and confirm our value. But God says to us that that will no longer define us, that will no longer be our identity, that God values us, and when God values us, all other measurements of value are marginalized. And there is a specific moment at which our identity, our value, our relationship to God, is created, and all the fundamental things about our lives change. That moment is our baptism.

For Paul, baptism is a critical moment and far more than just a symbolic act, although there are many that say you should never say “only” a symbol, or “merely” a symbol. A symbol, they would say, engages you directly in that to which it points, making you a part, a participant, in it. Which is just how Paul describes the importance of baptism in our second lesson. Don’t you know that when you were baptized you were baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection? When you went under the water you were buried with him, when you came out you experienced the resurrection power he experienced. Through your baptism you shed your old self, controlled and conditioned by the power of sin, like a snake sheds its skin, and when you came out you were a different person, walking in the newness of life. Under the power of God’s love in Christ, rather than the power of sin. It’s like you’ve been moved from one dimension to another. Or like a slave that has been moved into the ownership of a new master, now the power of sin is no longer your master, the power of Christ’s love is your master.

This is all a gift to us, by God’s overwhelming desire to have us be part of his family, his people. So why would you go back to living the way you used to live? Live who you have become in your baptism. There is a famous Martin Luther quote that has been taken out of its context in a way that makes it sound as though he was contradicting Paul. While in exile in the Wartburg Castle in 1521, Luther sent a letter to his friend Philip Melancthon encouraging him to do all he could to push forward with reforms in Wittenberg. He tells Philip not to fear that he might say or do something detrimental to the movement. Then he says, “Sin boldly, but believe even more boldly still.” Live the new life you have received in baptism, live the love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy that you have received. Have no fear, do not worry about making an error, trust God, trust your baptism, trust who you are, God’s beloved. Doing that, you will experience a newness, a freshness, an openness to life, life with God, what we call eternal life. It’s all a gift. What a wonderful scandal. Amen