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Sermon: Again and Again  
Text: Romans 6:1-11  
June 25, 2023

## Romans 6 :1-11

6 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> Therefore we were 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 also might walk in newness of life. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For whoever has died is freed<sup>[a]</sup> from sin. <sup>8</sup> But if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Prior to our scripture lesson today, the apostle Paul has once again made an astounding claim. He has reminded the Roman congregation that while they are still sinners, Christ's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 'For just by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners,' Paul proclaims that 'so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.' Our lives are full of warts, frailties, and mistakes, Paul tells this Roman congregation, but through Christ's life and death and resurrection, God chooses to see us not just as the flawed and imperfect and impaired human beings that we often are, but God chooses to see us as obedient, flourishing, and full of grace. We are, in Martin Luther's words, at the very same time *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously redeemed and sinner. Or in Flannery O'Connor's words, after one of her own characters Ruby Turpin's life is disrupted after being called a warthog from hell, she prays this prayer to God, 'What do you send me a message like that for...how am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?'<sup>1</sup> At the very same time we are both of these things.

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 'Revelation,' 506.

I know what you are thinking, and maybe you are right. And maybe you aren't the only ones thinking it. Maybe the Romans were too. If Christ has died for the ungodly, if Christ's obedience has made the disobedient righteous before God, if 'one's man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all, (Romans 5:18),' then why does it matter what I do. Why does it matter if I try to be obedient or go the extra mile or make the effort to set the alarm, brush hair, fasten seat belts, take some shots of coffee, and find my way to worship, if Christ's act of righteousness has already done all the work? Or if we want to quote from Paul directly at the beginning of our scripture lesson, if grace abounds all the more where sin has increased, 'Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound' all the more?

Many years ago I was leading a class on Paul's letter to the Romans and we were discussing Paul's teaching on justification, in particular his teaching on Christ's total redemption of humanity unfolded in chapters three through five. And we were mulling over the impact and consequence of Paul's teaching that Christ has already reconciled us to God before we ever thought about acknowledging it or got around to responding to it. A person in the class piped up, 'If Christ's has done everything for us already, if there is nothing we have to do, then why are we here? What's the point?' She was asking the very same question Paul is anticipating from the Romans, If Christ has redeemed us and there is nothing we have to do, why bother? Why not sin even more so grace may abound even more?

One of Steve Martin's most special acting jobs, in my view, took place in the 1989 film Parenthood, in which he played a dutiful son with a wife and three kids and mini-van, but nevertheless who was challenged by the eccentricities and stresses of being a parent, being a spouse, being a child to parents, dealing with a child with learning disabilities and a brother who was always borrowing money and losing it or another child who was afraid to fail on the baseball field whether that meant catching the ball or swinging the bat or making an out. At a particular moment of high stress, with all these family dynamics coming to a head at once, Steve Martin looks at his wife, and says, 'my whole life is have-to.' My whole life is have-to. And what Paul is telling the Romans, is that ultimately there is no have-to hanging over their lives. Like it or not, Christ has done away with all the have-to's. Or to quote Romans chapter 8 verse 1: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' That means God has determined our lives to not simply be at the mercy of any of our whims, it means that there is more to our lives than what we make of them or don't make of them, it means that what we think of as

some of our greatest life's accomplishments may matter less than some small act of faithfulness that we barely noticed in the moment but that allowed another human life to see Christ. It means that there are no 'have-tos,' in life, only 'get-tos.'

In another congregation, a pillar of the church dutifully would get the kids ready for Sunday church, wake up early, brush away the cow licks and scrub the faces and make them put on dress clothes. Inevitably a voice would utter from the backseat, perhaps a voice you have heard from time to time, perhaps a voice that has come from out of our own mouths. 'Ah, mom, why do we have to go to church.' 'It's boring, the minister does not know when to end the sermon, we have to sit still, we can't get our clothes messed up, there is more fun stuff to do. Do we have to go?' And God bless her she did not just say, because I said so or even, yes, church is a have-to, something we have to do to check off the list, no, she just said this: 'because this is who we are.' Because this is who we are. Because we get to do this. It's a honor, it's a joy, it's a privilege, it's a grace.'

We do not accept as the only reality that there is, the defining reality of who we are, that we are broken, that we are irreparably flawed, that we are only capable of our worst. We go to church to be reminded who we truly are, sinful, but forgiven, impaired, but repaired, incomplete, yet made whole, dead to sin and alive to the power of the resurrection, not condemned, and not only declared righteous, but actually on our way to being righteous. Because this is who we are. We have to be told this over and over and over again, because like the person in the bible study who understood exactly what Paul was saying in Romans, it is still hard to believe, because there is nowhere else in the whole wide world that sees us this way. In the marketplace, we are purchasers of product and consumers. In front of the screen we are fodder for algorithms. In the workplace, we are necessary as long as our particular skills are useful and efficient. There is nowhere else in our utilitarian world that tells every human being who enters into the presence of God that you belong and you are Christ's no matter your skill level, no matter your ability, no matter your gender, no matter your plans for life, no matter your past, no matter your resume, no matter your disbelief, no matter your struggles, no matter any of this, this is who you are: a fully alive human being fearfully and wonderfully made by God, a sinner of Christ's own redeeming, and a person for whom God is not done.

On that note, a personal favorite quotation of mine from the theologian Karl Barth that I need to revisit each and every day is this one: 'One never is a Christian [we do not reach some state of being a Christian], one can

only become one again and again: in the evening of each day somewhat ashamed about one's Christianity of the day just over, and in the morning of each new day glad that one may dare to be one all over again, with solace, with one's fellow humanity, with hope, with everything. The Christian congregation is of one mind in that it consists of real beginners.'<sup>2</sup> Which is why, on a day like today when we have had the privilege of welcoming two new members into our life together through the sacrament of baptism, why baptism is so central to who we are. Through the waters of baptism we are reminded, each and every time we touch these waters, that we are baptized into Christ's death and given an identity not defined by our disobedience, our brokenness, and the worst that is in us. Even though all these things could be remembered and sliced and diced by God, through baptism God chooses to see us as 'those who have been raised with Christ from the dead by the glory of the Father so that we too might walk in newness of life.' According to Paul, our baptismal identity, the fact that we belong to and are united in life and in death to Jesus Christ our Lord, is stronger than all the other ways we think our lives are determined, defined, and truly make us.

Former President of Princeton Theological Seminary, Craig Barnes once wrote that the highest calling any of us will have is not related to any one particular job or occupation, especially those who are privileged to serve in pastoral positions, but the highest calling we have is to 'participate in the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. Some of us are called to ministry of word and sacrament, which is no greater than to be what Martin Luther called the 'little Christ' as a banker, teacher, homemaker, or nurse. But most of all we are all called to glorify and enjoy God.' But then he adds this: 'nothing gets in the way of this highest of all callings more than trying to get the right answer on which fork to take in the road. God owns all the roads. Or as C.S. Lewis once said, 'God can use even the wrong road to get you to the right place.'<sup>3</sup> But as we also remember at every baptism, we can never unbaptize ourselves, no matter how hard we may try, no matter how many wrong roads we think we are on and how many dark nights of the soul we may experience. We have been united to Jesus Christ and nothing can separate us from him. Not even us. It doesn't mean that we don't try. That is also part of who we are.

Back to the question from the back seat, why do we have to go to church, again? What about this answer...probably too long for the card ride or the exasperated parent or spouse or neighbor, but here

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<sup>2</sup> Quotation from the Center for Barth Studies (1948), Princeton Theological Seminary.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Barnes, 'One Calling, Among Many,' in *The Christian Century* (April 2, 2014).

goes...because though I am a child of God through baptism, I am always on the verge of forgetting it or doing something stupid to obscure it for the moment, because by the time Thursday or Friday or Saturday get here, I begin to have amnesia, I forget that I am a Christian, that I belong to Jesus Christ, that I have a baptismal identity and a calling to follow him and to share in his life together and to care about people and the world beyond the end of my nose. I come to church because I forget who I am, I lose sight of who I am called to be, I forget that my life has been claimed in the waters of baptism to glorify God and to seek the welfare of others, not just my friends, but all my neighbors, even my enemies. I forget who I am or I simply settle for being a consumer or hedonist or an indifferent modern and don't really worry whether or not God's grace and love are known and celebrated and adored in my life. Maybe I am content with the confines of my story and don't really see any need to enlarge it beyond myself. But I go to church to be reminded that I have been made a part of a larger story, by God's grace, through the sacrament of baptism, through a community that has claimed me, called me, loved me, cared for me, prayed for me, and challenged me to walk in newness of life on the way to being made righteous in Jesus Christ. This is who I am. This is who you are. But we forget. We think it is powerless or antiquated or obsolete. But again and again, by God's grace, we walk through these doors, we pass through these waters, we are ambushed by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and something happens to us, and we become a Christian once again, and again, and again. Amen.