

Lectionary 12 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

June 21, 2020

Romans 6:1b-11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most important books in the Bible. It was acknowledged by Martin Luther that it was his study of Romans that led to his essential "Reformation breakthrough" about the relationship between faith and justification.

It's an important book. It's also a deep book. I got my Master of Divinity at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The class on Romans was taught by a tough German professor named Hans Dieter Betz. Brilliant and tough. I say class, but it was two classes. Romans has sixteen chapters. There was one whole graduate level seminar on chapters one through eight. If you survived that, you could take the second graduate level seminar on chapters nine through sixteen. I didn't go anywhere near that class. I graduated from the University of Chicago, which is not affiliated with a denomination. And then I had to take Lutheran course work at a Lutheran seminary. The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. And there, Romans was also divided into two classes. The first eight chapters in one class. The last eight chapters in a second class. Taught by a tough professor with a German name, Edgar Krentz. And once again, I didn't go anywhere near that course.

It's not completely unheard of to have an entire graduate seminar course on a single book of the Bible. Some of the major big books of the Bible get that kind of treatment. Genesis and Isaiah in the Old Testament. The Gospel According to John in the New. But to have one book taught in two separate courses— and a short book at that (Romans is one-third the size of Luke's gospel) — that's really something I've only heard of in one case. Romans. It's a very, very deep book. I have not mastered it. And that's okay. That doesn't prevent you from appreciating the nuggets of gold that can be successfully appropriated out of context. But it's an extraordinarily sophisticated piece of writing, universally recognized as Paul's greatest surviving writing, his *tour de force*.

Our church follows the lectionary, a three year schedule of assigned scriptures, and we have begun a sojourn in Romans stretching through June, July, August, and into the middle of September. And today we have eleven verses from Romans. Eleven verses. Not a lot. But very, very dense. It's a section that has to do with Paul's understanding of baptism. And Paul's understanding of baptism can't be easily untangled from the rest of his ideas which is why Romans is so hard to study in graduate school.

The essence of what Paul believes is that in baptism, we are joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so baptism is not about the washing away of sins as though they are dirt. Baptism is death and resurrection. It's an event that fuses us with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Us Lutherans, like a lot of Christians, we sprinkle water, or at most, pour water when we baptize. But there is a strong case to be made for submersion baptism. Dunking. In which the entire body goes under the water, and comes up out of the water. It really graphically seems like death and rebirth. Going under the water, as though drowning. And coming up out of the water, gasping for air, in a manner similar to a newborn coming out of the womb.

Lutherans don't really get that effect when we baptize. A death and a rebirth. An end to the old and the beginning of the new. But I'll tell you what we do get. In our worship spaces we have a Paschal Candle. The Passover candle, the Easter candle. It's the six foot tall candle that is lit only at certain times. And those times are Easter, and whenever there is a baptism, and whenever we remember the dead, such as a funeral, or on All Saints' Day. That candle moves to the altar at Easter, and is at the font the rest of the year. And it's a symbol of Christ in resurrection and in baptism and in death. And how we are joined to him in his death and his resurrection by our baptism. And so although we don't use water as dramatically and as effectively as other Christians, we do at least connect the dots between death and Easter and baptism by our use of that very special candle.

What does this mean in real life? Paul thinks that you and I are either under the control of sin, or under the control of God's love. And sin isn't just smoking cigarettes and drinking beer and cussing and playing cards. For Paul, sin is this force that turns us inward and away from God and from one another and from our true selves. And it's a very powerful force. Such that Paul uses the language of slavery. We are enslaved to sin. Sin dominates us. We are not free.

But Jesus has set us free. By the action that we commonly call Easter. His passion, his death, and his being raised from the dead. Those actions make it possible for us to be freed from the power of sin. And Paul believes that baptism is how that possibility becomes real for us. This short section of Romans is quoted by Martin Luther in his Small Catechism, in the section on baptism. And Luther explains it like this: *It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.* Drowned and die through daily sorrow. There's that image of drowning again, which is intrinsic to baptism by submersion. That's a pretty sober statement. Part of me and part of you must be drowned and die. Through daily sorrow. And. Daily a new person comes forward. And whatever else one might think about Luther or his Small Catechism, he definitely got Paul just right. Luther understood Romans chapter six, verse four. *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.*

If you have a one-dimensional view of Christianity, then this is going to really mess with you.

As it probably should. It challenges what many people think about baptism, about death and resurrection, and about justification. A lot of people have a one-dimensional view of baptism, that it's only initiation. It's how you join the church. But clearly, for Paul, it's much more than that. It is the vehicle that binds us to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which creates the possibility of living free from the slavery of sin and in the new life of God. It's a transformation of existence. Not just membership in a church, not just a boarding pass for the train to heaven.

So this piece of Romans will not permit you to continue that one-dimensional view of baptism. And nor will it allow you to cling to your idea of death and resurrection if you think that those are things that pertain only to the day you take your last breath, or to the day you meet your Maker. On the contrary, for Paul, death and resurrection have already begun in your life. They began at baptism. And as Luther says, this has ongoing daily implications. Death is daily. New life is daily. Yes, there is a day when our mortal body goes kaput and we meet our Maker and we find out if cats make it to heaven. But the death and resurrection that Paul is talking about is ongoing. It is the essence of Christian discipleship. It is the essence of the Church.

Not much room for one-dimensional views. The idea of justification is also more expansive. The notion of repenting and turning to God is not just a one-time act. Nor is it an easy act or a simple decision. It is death and resurrection. We let go of a claim. There is loss. Grace is meaningless for self-sufficient people. So justification involves our death and rebirth. But that is only possible due to Christ's death and rebirth. And baptism is the agent that binds him to us, his death and resurrection, to our death and resurrection.

So: eleven verses of Romans. Not a very long passage. But pretty dense with meaning. And this is why it is not a simple book of the Bible to master. Paul's understanding of baptism may not be the one you grew up with. Even though it's been there the whole time. It is about the possibility, and frankly the promise, that we are not slaves to sin and death forever. There is newness of life available right now. There is a new possibility right now. There is freedom for God's goodness right now. Amen.