



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 8:12-17

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Our Epistle this morning continues the walk we've been taking through St. Paul's letter to the Romans. We're looking at Romans 8:12-17 today. For several weeks the lectionary has had us skipping through this section of the epistle, hitting the high points of Paul's argument as he talks about what it means to be rescued by Jesus from our bondage to sin and death and made alive to God. Through these chapters of Romans Paul describes how we've been rescued by Jesus and he does this by putting our own rescue in the terms of Israel's rescue from slavery in Egypt. We picture the Israelites dancing and singing in praise of their God on the far shore of the Red Sea. The Lord had rescued Israel and he hadn't just rescued her, he'd rescued her in an amazing show of his power and authority as he parted the sea and then as he drowned the Egyptian army. The people weren't just dancing and singing because they were happy; they were praising the Lord and they were ready to serve him and to follow him out of gratitude for what he'd done for them. And now Paul's headed in the same direction with us. That same God has rescued *us* from our slavery to sin and death and he's done it by becoming, himself, one of us in Jesus. He humbled himself, he suffered, he died, and he rose from the grave for *our* sake. He's freed us from our bondage and he's given us new life—his own life. But it's even greater than that. If God has rescued us from bondage as he did the Israelites, that means that just as he made and called Israel his children, so

through Jesus he has adopted *us* as his own and made us his children.

But then Paul realizes that he needs to stress another point before he goes on. And so Paul stops and he switches gears for just a moment and he says in verse 12:

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

We are debtors, he says. We're all, you and I, in debt. For most people that sounds like bad news. Unless you're a politician and can raise taxes or get your central bank to monetize your debt, debt is something that weighs heavily on people. And, of course, once you're in debt that debt often ends up dominating everything in your life. And now Paul says that *we* are debtors. That sounds bad, but he lifts at least some of the weight off right away. We're debtors, but *not* to the flesh—not if we are in Jesus.

Last week I talked a little about how our baptism into Jesus changes everything. In our baptism we are regenerated. That means that our ownership is transferred from death to life, from sin to God. Our citizenship is transferred from the world to the kingdom of heaven. Think of Israel in the Exodus. They were slaves to Pharaoh. The Lord led them to the sea. They thought they were trapped between the sea and the army of Egypt, but then the Lord separated the waters and called them to pass through. The parted sea embodied his promise of a new life. They passed through in faith and they came out the other side a new people, no longer in bondage to Pharaoh, but belonging to the Lord. And so with us. In our baptism we step out in faith as we pass through the waters embodying God's promise of life. We renounce the old way of life. We renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil. That's repentance. We turned aside from and renounce everything that is not Jesus and in faith we pass through the water and put on Jesus. We let go of every

sin and every false source of security and we take hold of Jesus with both hands. He is now our life. We owe nothing to the flesh (or to the world or the devil, for that matter). That's not where our debt lies. That old life never did anything for us. Like Pharaoh holding the Israelites captive, it once held us, it ruled and controlled us, and all it did was give us death in return. Again, we owe nothing to the old life of our unredeemed flesh. That's not where our debt lies.

And so Paul goes on saying:

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

So here's the reality. Here's why Paul assures us we are not in debt to the flesh. We may be Christians, we may be in Jesus, we may be washed clean, but temptation is still here. We've renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil, but they still call to us. And that makes people doubt. It makes people think that just maybe we *are* in debt to the flesh. There's a myth that many Christians easily believe that says that the moment you become a Christian all temptation and all your problems are supposed to instantly vanish. But anyone who's honest knows that doesn't happen. Sanctification—that's the theological name for the process of being made holy—sanctification is a *process*—a *life-long* process—that happens as the Spirit transforms our hearts and minds, as we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures he's caused to be written and learn and grow and are confronted by that word about our sins and called again and again to repent. It's a process that unfolds as the word and the Spirit send us out into the darkness of the world and give us opportunities to shine the light of Jesus. It's a process. And this is why Paul tells us so many times and in so many places to put the old way of life to death. He tells us that it's been crucified with Jesus. He tells us that it's been buried with him in baptism. Yes, the temptation is still there. The

world, the flesh, and the devil scream at us, they grab hold of us, they try to shackles us to themselves and drag us back into sin and that's why Paul calls us to actively and to daily put that old life to death. A few weeks ago we read how he tells us to *consider* or to *reckon* that in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus and in light of his gift of the Holy Spirit we *are* dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus. It's a *fact*. It may not always feel that way, but it really does add up. All we have to do is live it out in faith and rely on God's grace and in doing that is the way of life.

In verses 14-15 Paul writes:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Paul's now leading us into the wilderness with Israel—he does this especially over the course of Romans 8—as he uses Old Testament imagery to describe the Christian life. He reminds us that Israel was led by the Lord himself when she left Egypt. Remember the cloud by day and the fire by night. So the Spirit of God leads us. And then Paul reminds us of Israel's struggle in the wilderness. Right from the start, at Mt. Sinai, as Moses was on the mountain receiving the law, the people forged and danced around a golden calf. The people grumbled against Moses and grumbled against the Lord. At first they grumbled because they had nothing to eat, so the Lord gave them manna. Then they grumbled because they got tired of eating boring old manna. They whined about how they missed the fleshpots of Egypt. Even as they prepared to enter the promised land, they heard the report of the spies who were sent to scope thing out and they whined that there was no way they'd be able to take the land—they were all

going to die. The very people who had been delivered at the Red Sea, the very people for whom the Lord provided miraculous care for forty years in the wilderness repeatedly fell back into idolatry and rebellion and even grumbled about how much better they'd had it in Egypt. But the Lord wouldn't let go of Israel. Why? When the Lord spoke to Pharaoh through Moses he had said, "*Israel is my firstborn son*, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." Israel was the Lord's son by adoption and *nothing* would stop the Lord from redeeming his son so that his son could worship him in the inheritance of the land he had promised.

St. Paul echoes all of this in Romans. Israel was in the wilderness and constantly tempted to return to Egypt—to return to the very bondage from which the Lord had rescued her. And here we are in our own wilderness. Jesus doesn't recue us and zap us straight to the New Jerusalem any more than the Lord zapped Israel straight to a depopulated promised land. We continue to struggle against the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. God led Israel, manifesting himself in the cloud and the fire. He leads us too, having poured his Spirit into us in our baptism. Think about that for a minute. Imagine the awe the Israelites had for the cloud and the fire. Where it moved they followed. Where it stopped they stopped and set up the tabernacle—and then the cloud or the fire would descend to rest in the holy of holies. Again, imagine the awe of that and then consider that we have something far more awesome—we have God the Holy Spirit *in us*! And yet just like Israel, we somehow allow the miraculous presence of God with us and in us to become mundane and we give in to the temptation to grumble and to return to our bondage to sin.

Paul knows all this. He wasn't immune to temptation either. And this is why he so adamantly tells us not to lose hope and not to stop fighting. We weren't given the spirit of slavery, he says. That's what we've been rescued *from*. No, we've been given the Spirit of *adoption*. As he made Israel his sons and daughters, the Lord through Jesus has made *us* his sons and daughters, he has taken our dead wood and grafted it into the living vine. We've been made a part of that "family tree" called "Israel". We are his children and we can cry out to him just as Jesus did, "Abba! Father!" He is as much our Father as he is Jesus' Father and Paul stresses that he's not a distant Father; he's near, he loves us, he cares for us. That's the point of "Abba". It's not that we should think of "Daddy God" as is sometimes said. It's that the God to whom we rightly fall on our knees in humble submission as we cry out, "Holy, holy, holy!" is not just *the* Father, but *our* Father just as he is Jesus' Father. We are his beloved sons and daughters. And this is the first reality the Spirit drive home to us when he's poured into us. In Chapter 5 Paul writes about a love for God that the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts. That's what he's talking about here. In verse 16 Paul writes,

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...

Somehow and in some way our adoption by God in Jesus is confirmed by this witness that comes as the Holy Spirit being poured in and our now regenerated and renewed spirit connect. When I read this I can't help but think of the old days of using a modem to dial up to another computer or to the internet. You'd hear the modem dial, the other modem would pick up and then you'd hear what sounded like static and pings and pongs back and forth as they negotiated a connection that they could both maintain. The technical

term for that was “hand-shaking”. And when it was finished you were connected. God’s Spirit and our spirit do something like that on a spiritual level and the end result of that “connection” is the assurance that we are children of God. And, Paul goes on in verse 17:

...and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Children receive an inheritance. Israel was promised that her inheritance would be the land of Canaan, but there was a broader aspect to it too. She was also called to be a blessing to the nations as part of that promised inheritance and we see this in Jesus. As far back as Psalm 2 it was promised to the Messiah: “I will make the *nations* your heritage, and the *ends of the earth* your possession.” But now Paul shows us what it means in Christian terms—what it means for those of us who are in Jesus. It means that the whole earth, all of creation is the inheritance of Jesus and his people. It means that when the end of the age finally comes, God will vindicate Jesus and his people, he will resurrect us all as he already has Jesus, and somehow our resurrection will be worked out in Creation itself as literally everything is made new and set free from the sickness, corruption, and death to which our sin has bound it.

This is what Paul means when he says that we will be glorified with Jesus. We’ve talked about this before. We often think of “glory” as a place: heaven when you die. But glory isn’t so much a place as it is a state. Jesus will come into his glory as he is given dominion over God’s renewed creation and we, his people, will be glorified with him as we human beings are restored to our rightful state—to the state for which God created us. Remember Adam and Eve, created to

be God’s stewards as they exercised dominion over his creation—caring for it, subduing it, and growing and expanding the garden until it filled the whole earth—maybe even somehow the whole cosmos. That’s what it means to be God’s image-bearers. And that is the task that Jesus has come—like a second Adam, Paul has said—to set Creation to rights and to get everything back on track. This is our inheritance as God’s sons and daughters.

And this, finally, brings us back to Paul’s statement about our being debtors. We’re not debtors to the flesh to fall back into that old way of bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil. No, we are debtors to the God who created us, who loves us, who loved us even when we rejected him, rebelled against him, and sinned against him. We are debtors to the God who still, despite our ugliness, desired to reconcile us to himself by providing a means of forgiveness. We are debtors to the God who humbled himself to take on our flesh and to die for us so that we can be reconciled to him and restored to our place as his children and the stewards of his creation. This is love so deep and grace so wide that even in a lifetime we can never fully grasp its depth and its width, but it is our inheritance in Jesus and, Paul says, it puts us forever in God’s debt. And as debt tends to dominate the life of the debtor, this debt ought to dominate our lives. The good news is that this isn’t the crushing sort of debt we’re sadly so often accustomed to living with. Instead, this is a debt of love and mercy and grace and freedom. It’s a debt that moves us out of love in return for the love we’ve been shown to make that love manifest to all. And, Brothers and Sisters, it’s an inheritance so great that we ought to be living in hope and anticipation, so excited that we can’t wait for that last great day when we see it in full, but that we spend each day as Jesus did making it manifest in whatever way

we can today: preaching good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and looking forward to the day when the glory of the Lord fills the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in Jesus you have redeemed us from sin and death and forgiven us our rebellion. Teach us, we pray, the depth of your love and grace that we would be moved, loving you in return, to put to death sin and to live for righteousness so that the whole world will give you glory as they see your grace at work in us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.