



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity

**Romans 6:3-11 &
St. Matthew 5:20-26**

Fr. William Klock
July 31, 2011 — Trinity 6

Several years ago I read a story about a waterfront hotel in Galveston, near Houston. The hotel is built on a pier over the water. When it first opened, the management found that they were frequently having to replace broken windows in the first-floor restaurant. You see, people staying in the rooms above—the hotel being on a pier—were fishing from their balconies. In order to get their lines all the way down to the water, they were using heavy lead sinker weights, but it was pretty common for those lead sinkers to swing back and break the windows. When they built the hotel they anticipated that this might happen, so they put up “No Fishing” signs on all the balconies, but the signs didn’t stop people. Since people were fishing anyway and since the “No Fishing” signs were so frequently being defaced, the management gave up and took the signs down. Suddenly, people stopped fishing off the balconies.

One of my customers when I repaired computers was a rancher from eastern Oregon. He told me one day how he was afraid hunters would start hunting on part of his property so he put up no trespassing signs. What he found was that the sign seemed to be taken as an invitation to trespass. He thought he’d get more specific; he took down the “No Trespassing” sign and replaced it with a “No Hunting” sign. Suddenly every hunter that passed by had to shoot the “No Hunting” sign and put a bullet hole in it.

As human beings—as descendants of Adam, the first sinner—we’re all naturally prone to sin, but it’s amazing just how often we willfully choose to do sinful things that we never would have done had someone not given us the idea in the first place by telling us not to do it. One of my history professors said that the world would have fewer problems if kings and

princes, parliaments and congresses would remember one simple principle: Don’t tell the babysitter not to stick peas up the baby’s nose. Once you tell people not to do something they wouldn’t have done—and often something that never would have crossed their minds—they’re going to be tempted to do it. We are naturally rebellious creatures!

St. Paul addresses this in our Epistle lesson today from Romans 6. In the previous chapter he addressed the issue of sin and grace. He reminds us that God’s grace is made abundant by our sinful condition. After all, the worse we are the more generous God is with his grace to overcome our sin.

Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Romans 5:20-21)

But not everyone understood what Paul was saying here. Again, Paul’s point is to stress the amazing graciousness of God—that no matter how bad we are, he won’t give up on us, but will always pour out his grace to save and to sanctify. But some people read this and thought, “I like grace. Grace is good. I also like sin. Sin is fun. So why not sin all the more—doesn’t that just mean even more grace from God? Why can’t I be a Christian and a sinner at the same time—in fact, Paul, it sounds like your saying that maybe if I sin more, God will give me more grace and I’ll be a better Christian for it.”

And Paul anticipated this and answers with an emphatic “No!” Literally the Greek says, “May it never be!” It’s a strong condemnation. Grace isn’t given to give us license. Grace is given to forgive and to help us overcome our sin.

Grace is unmerited favour. In our natural, sinful state we’re deserving of death, yet God sent his own son to die for us so that his righteousness could be extended to us to save us from that death. We didn’t earn it. We didn’t merit it. God’s offering of his Son for us is an act of grace. Grace abounds where there is sin because it takes grace to overcome that sin—the more sin there is to overcome the more grace God will give.

But, you see, God doesn’t give us grace so that we can be saved, and then keep on

living in our sin. By his grace he saves us from the consequences of our sins—from eternal death. But what happens when we experience God’s saving grace? It *should* make a dramatic change in our lives. God has spared us. How often does someone do something gracious for you—like sparing your life—and it makes no difference in your relationship with them? I would guess, never. Grace doesn’t work that way.

Several times I’ve come across a story that took place during the reign of Elizabeth I. Elizabeth took the throne at a very turbulent time in history. There were quite a few attempts made to assassinate her. On one occasion a woman was paid to disguise herself as a page in order to sneak into the palace. She then hid herself in the Queen’s bedroom, where she waited until the right time to sneak out of hiding and stab the Queen. What she didn’t anticipate is that the Queen’s guards made a thorough search of her quarters every night. They found the woman hiding and dragged her before the Queen. As she stood there held by the royal guards before the Queen this woman knew that her case was hopeless. The Queen had *no* reason not to have her executed. And so in desperation she fell to her knees and begged the Queen for mercy—begged for Her Grace to show her grace. Queen Elizabeth looked at her coldly and asked, “If I show you grace, what promise will you make for the future?” And the, story says, the woman looked up at her said, “Grace that hath conditions, grace that is fettered by precautions, is not grace at all.” The Queen immediately understood and said, “You are right; I pardon you of my grace.” The woman was led away free. What’s important here is the result of that gracious pardon. The would be assassin, in return for the grace shown to her, became the Queen’s most devoted servant. It should be the same for us. When God shows us his grace in our lives—when we, guilty of sin, of cosmic treason against our Creator and deserving only eternal damnation, are not only spared death but given the honour of living as adopted sons and daughters of God—that should prompt us to become his devoted servants—not out of obligation or duty, but out of a sincere desire to serve the one who sacrificed himself for us when we were totally unworthy of it.

As St. John says, “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But

if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” The grace of God isn’t a license to keep sinning. The grace of God is our *motive* for good works. The grace of God isn’t just a “Get Out of Hell Free” card, it’s something that, if we’ve truly received it and understood just how bad we are and just how lovingly gracious God is, should totally transform our lives.

What’s sad is that too much of the time it doesn’t really change us. We see churches full of people who continue living in unrepentant sin, we hear about polls taken that say that 70 or 80 or 90% of North Americans claim to be Christians, and yet only a small percentage of those people show any real evidence of having been transformed by God’s grace. Sometimes it’s our own fault. The Church has been guilty of not sharing the whole of the Gospel with people. We evangelise with only half the message. We tell them God loves them and wants to be in fellowship with them, but we’re afraid to tell them the part about how we’re all sinners and that the only way back into fellowship with God is to come before him in *humility as sinners* , to fall on his grace, and to truly make Jesus our *Lord* —to truly trust him and follow him. But brothers and sisters, when we leave that part out, we simply end up at best with churches full of do-gooders who are proud and *self-righteous* and at worst we leave people worse off than they were before we encountered them, because we’ve given them false assurance of a salvation they haven’t really received. We don’t see transformed lives, because so many of these people have never truly experienced God’s grace. The woman assassin in the story knew that she truly deserved death and that’s why the Queen’s forgiving grace transformed her life. Take away the knowledge of sin and grace has no meaning and no transforming power!

St. James gets at this from the opposite direction in his epistle when he tells us that faith without good works is dead—that a profession of faith without evidence of a transformed life is hollow. He wrote:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of

you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (James 2:14-26)

Salvation in Christ isn’t just fire insurance—it’s a change in lifestyle that leaves the Old Man, as St. Paul calls him, dead and gives birth to a New Man who finds his life in the grace of God through Jesus. Our faith leads us out of sin and into a life of good works. Faith without the evidence of works is not real faith at all. After the Lord’s Supper this morning we’ll pray a prayer that you should be familiar with: “Almighty and everliving God, we thank you that you graciously feed us, who have duly received these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, and assure us thereby of your favour and goodness towards us, and that we are true members of the mystical body of your Son, the blessed company of all faithful people, and are also heirs, through hope, of your eternal kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of your dear Son. And we humbly beseech you, heavenly Father, so to assist us with your grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as you have prepared for us to walk in.” This is what the Lord’s Supper is all

about: receiving and experiencing the amazing grace of God towards us sinners and then responding by thankfully and joyfully following him. Here, in one simple prayer, we have all the Gospel summed up—and note especially those closing words asking for the Father’s heavenly grace so that we can continue on in holy fellowship and a walk of good works.

Look back to our Epistle lesson from Romans 6 again. St. Paul uses this imagery of death and life, of crucifixion and baptism to explain how it is that we find ourselves in this regenerated condition.

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... (Romans 6:3,4)

St. Paul’s simple point here is that when we pass through the baptismal waters it’s as though we’re buried with Christ. Our old selves die and are placed in that garden tomb with Jesus’ dead body.

But this would leave us in a pretty depressing situation if we stopped here. That’s why back during Holy Week and Eater I stressed that we are not just a Good Friday people. We are an Easter people. Jesus didn’t stop when he died, offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He also rose from the dead, triumphant over sin and death. St. Paul goes on, saying:

As Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 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. (Romans 6:4,5)

The Old Man, through baptism, is crucified with Christ and the New Man is brought to life with Christ’s resurrection. Paul talks about this next in terms of slavery versus freedom. Look at verses 6 to 11:

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have 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. For 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.

Does a freed slave run back to his old master so that he can be beaten and enslaved again? Of course not. Would a dead man raised to life climb back into his casket and ask to be put back in the ground? When Jesus raised Lazarus, do you think Lazarus went back to his tomb and setup house there? No. He had been saved from death and he lived the life that Jesus had given him. I expect, having been given a second chance, he probably lived it a lot more fully than he had before.

Brothers and sisters, if we have truly encountered the grace of God in Jesus Christ, sin and death no longer have dominion over us. To continue in sin is to be like a slave who returns to his master. To continue in sin is like Lazarus going back and living in the tomb and dressing for the rest of his life in his burial shroud. This is why Paul goes on. If our lesson were a few verses longer we'd read this exhortation in verses 12 to 14:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:12-14)

Friends, is that what characterizes us? Granted, sanctification is a process. God's grace doesn't make us instantly holy. It gradually draws us further and further from the tomb—further and further from sin as the Holy Spirit works in our lives. But are we actually walking away from the tomb of sin and death or are we happy to just sit in the doorway with one foot in God's kingdom of life and the other still in the kingdom of the world?

Today's Gospel warns us about this too. Jesus warned the people: God's standard

is a perfect standard. God looks not just at our outward actions, but he looks in our hearts and judges our motives. The Pharisees considered themselves righteous—they considered themselves to have met God's requirement—because they hadn't actually murdered anyone, but Jesus then tells us that to be angry with a brother or have sinned against him is just as bad as far as God is concerned. Murder in the heart will put you under the judgement of God just as easily as actual murder will.

You see, it's easy to judge ourselves by looking at others and then think that we're okay because we're not as bad as they are. Jesus calls us to look into our hearts. We might not have sinned in deed, but if we're still sinning in thought, if we're still sinning passively by what we're not doing, we're still sitting on the doorstep of the tomb. In fact, we may have one foot tentatively in God's kingdom, but our heart and our other foot are both still firmly planted in the tomb—still firmly planted in sin and death. We can't really walk in the new life Jesus gives until we've set our eyes and our heart on him and are walking away from the tomb with both feet.

In our closing hymn this morning we'll sing these words:

*Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing;
Fill our hearts with joy and peace;
Let us each, thy love possessing,
Triumph in redeeming grace:
O refresh us, O refresh us,
Trav'ling through this wilderness.*

*Thanks we give and adoration
For thy Gospel's joyful sound:
May the fruits of thy salvation
In our hearts and lives abound:
May thy presence,
May thy presence
With us evermore be found.*

The last few weeks our lessons have been showing us what it means to live in God's joy and peace, what it means to possess his love, and today we're called to "triumph in redeeming grace" and to let the "fruits of" his "salvation in our hearts and lives abound." Brothers and sisters, we do that better every day as come to realize our sin—the depth of it, the seriousness of it, the horribleness of it—and then turn with humility and trust to

our Saviour. The better we understand just how ugly we are as sinners, the better we'll be able to see just how beautiful and glorious Jesus is. It's an odd thing from a worldly perspective where everything's about self-worth and self-esteem, but the fact is that the more lowly we esteem ourselves, the more accurately we see the ugliness of our sin and the dark decay of the tomb from which we've come, the clearer vision we'll have to see the glory of the Saviour—and the clearer vision we have of the Saviour, the more we'll come to appreciate the amazing grace that he offers. And, of course, the more we appreciate his grace, the faster we'll run from the tomb, following him in love and good works out of gratitude for what he has done.

Please pray with me: God our Father, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass man's understanding: pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you above all things, may obtain your promises which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.