

Alive to God

June 9, 2024 AM Sermon
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Romans 6:1-11

In a scene from the 1980s movie *When Harry Met Sally*, the title character of Harry Burns is sitting in the stands at a New York Giants football game with his friend Jess. As the then-popular “wave” washes over the stadium with people standing up and putting their arms in the air to create a wave-like effect moving across the stands, Harry is visibly depressed. He then informs Jess that his wife had recently suggested that perhaps they could live apart. Perhaps they could see other people. But perhaps they could still see one another occasionally kind of like when they were dating. Harry then says, “I got married so I could stop dating so I don’t see how dating your own wife is at all attractive.”

It reminds me of something author Philip Yancey wrote in one of his books. Yancey invites us to consider what would surely be an absurd scenario. Imagine a couple who fell in love and eventually got married. The wedding and reception were grand affairs and the couple then spent their wedding night in the Honeymoon Suite of a fine hotel.

But imagine the next morning at breakfast the husband says, “Honey, as we get going on our married life together, I wonder if we might negotiate a bit on how often I could see also other people.” This is indeed absurd. You get married to be exclusive. Marriage means *not* seeing other people. No sane married person would suggest a scenario in which he could simultaneously live like a non-married person. The only possible response to a new husband making such a suggestion would be to say, “Are you out of your mind? Are you nuts?”

Cue the Apostle Paul’s reaction when he got wind of the fact that some in the early church had taken his message on salvation by grace alone as a license to live however they wanted. Paul encountered an early version of a saying that has often been attributed to the writer Heinrich Heine: “God likes to forgive. I like to sin. Really, the world is admirably arranged.” So also some in Rome apparently had concluded that since God loves to forgive by grace alone, let’s give God ample opportunity to let that grace abound again and again to cover our ongoing sins. “Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow God will wipe the slate clean again.”

In the Greek language there are four main moods of verbs, three of which we have in also English. There is the indicative mood for simple declarations. “The sun is shining brightly today.” There is the imperative mood for the giving of commands. “Sit down and eat your broccoli!” There is the subjunctive mood to consider possibilities. “If I were the president I would . . .” But there is also the optative mood to express future hopes and wishes. “May you find great success in your new career!” Or more forcefully in a negative way, “Cancer? May you never experience that!” In most Greek literature outside of the New Testament, the optative comes up a lot. In the Greek of the Bible, though, it hardly ever comes up.

But one of the relatively rare, but very important, uses of the optative is right here in Romans 6:2 when Paul invokes this verb mood to answer his opening question through the optative Greek line “*Me genoito!*” “Should we sin more so grace can abound? *Me genoito!* By no means!” Paul needs the force of the optative here to convey something that could be paraphrased “Absolutely and absolutely not! No way! Are you kidding? Are you nuts?” The verb in the optative mood brings home Paul’s incredulity.

The balance of our passage this morning explains how and why Paul found this idea to be absurd. It is in fact so absurd Paul concludes that those saying this have missed a fundamental fact of Christian identity. They have missed what *baptism* really means. Sometimes it seems that we in the church today may have a similar struggle, but more on that in a bit.

But first we can recall that when we read New Testament epistles or letters like Romans, we are always basically reading someone else’s mail. This was not written specifically to us. And at least some of Paul’s letters in the New Testament are replies to an original letter to which we have no access.

Suppose one day after your grandma died you run across a shoebox of old letters that your grandma had received from her sister. You don’t have grandma’s original letters to her sister so when your aunt mentioned sharing grandma’s concern about someone named Phil, you won’t know right off the bat who Phil was or what

was concerning about him. If your aunt wrote, "That recipe you sent worked out great," you won't know if what grandma had sent was a recipe for cherry pie or a pot roast. You will have to do some work to figure this out.

Romans 6 is the same. Paul is responding to some misunderstanding of baptism but precisely what that entailed is not 100% certain. But possibly it was something like this: some in the Roman church concluded that baptism just cleaned up their souls for past sins. It is just a symbol that God likes to forgive. It is just an initiation rite that puts you in a place where God will continue to forgive your sins. It's symbolic but that's about it.

No, Paul says, that's incorrect! In baptism you die. The waters of baptism don't just wash sin from your soul the way physical water washes dirt off your hands. These waters are deeper than that. Deep enough, in fact, to drown in and that is what happened to your sinful self in your baptism. It died. It got buried. End of story. Except not quite the end because if you died and got buried with Jesus, come Easter you got raised with Jesus too! And not just raised but raised changed. You got raised new. A new creation, as Paul will write to the Corinthians. And just as getting married means by definition you don't get to see other people, so being buried with Christ into death and being raised with Christ to new life means you cannot want to perpetuate sinful activities.

Your baptism was no mere symbol! Your baptism changed you, altered your point of view, re-set your appetites, re-aligned what you find loathsome and what you find attractive. It is impossible to want to keep sinning when you died to the idea that sin is a great way to live, a way to have fun, a way to enjoy life. You now dwell in Christ, in his new life. Baptism ended the old you and the new you cannot want to undo that! Period! Any questions?

All of that forcefulness, however, is why verse 11 is so striking. Because as Paul rounds this out, he changes verb mood one more time. In verse 2 we had the optative mood of "By no means! No way!" In verses 3-10 we get the indicative mood of simple declarative statements like "You died! You were buried with Christ in baptism." But then in verse 11 we get the imperative mood, a command. "So then, just figure that this is true. Think of yourselves this way. Reckon that this is a fact. Count yourselves dead to sin. Just figure that you are alive to God and go from there."

Now this is not exactly what you might have thought Paul would say at this juncture! Why would he have to order people to think a certain way if everything he said in verses 2-10 is true? Shouldn't this be automatic for all who were truly baptized into Christ's name and into his death and resurrection? Doesn't it water down (forgive the pun) what he just said by then effectively conveying the idea, "So just figure that this is the case and that you are alive to God, OK?" What can explain this?

What explains it is our spiritual reality. Despite the cosmic and seismic work of Christ, we still live between the times. We are already and not yet people. We are citizens of the kingdom of God and yet still live in the kingdom of this world. We have been saved and we are being transformed but we're not home yet. I am not a big fan of t-shirt or bumper sticker slogans that reduce deeper theological ideas to a pithy saying but there is more than a little truth to the saying you sometimes see, "God is not finished with me yet." Everything Paul says in Romans 6 on the transformative nature of baptism is true. AND it is also true that for now we have to will ourselves to reckon that it's true. We must actively try to think this is the case and ask the Holy Spirit to help us live it out accordingly.

Since we began with a marriage analogy, let's extend that analogy to a wedding ring. Yes, the ring is a symbol of your marriage. But it is also a tangible reminder to you that this is who you are. When tempted to violate your marriage vow, use your thumb to touch the ring and remind yourself. Don't take off the ring when you go to have a drink at a bar on the off chance you might see someone attractive from whom you want to hide your marital status for unsavory reasons.

Maybe I should not use two movies in one sermon but another fine movie from the 1980s is the film *Moonstruck*. Olympia Dukakis won an Oscar for her portrayal of Rose Castarini, the long-suffering wife of a husband who has been seeing another woman in various ways for some time. At one point in the film Rose is dining alone at a local restaurant when she meets a charming rogue who is a college professor and whose date for the evening dramatically storms out at one point. Rose feels bad for the man and so invites him to join her for dinner, and later he walks her home. As they stand in front of Rose's walk-up brownstone home in Brooklyn, the man suggests maybe they should go into the house together and see what happens. Rose refuses.

“Oh, you think someone else is home?” the professor asks. “No, I think the house is empty” replies Rose. “I can’t invite you in because I’m married; because I know who I am.”

Because I know who I am. Think that way about yourselves, Paul urges in verse 11. Know who you are. Know who you are and act like it. Remember that you have been baptized and then live like you know what that means.

Today I don’t think we meet up with too many people who are so spiritually crass as to say in so many words, “Let’s sin more so that grace may abound.” But if the history of the church right up to this present moment is any indication, we continue to have the same basic struggle Paul identified in Rome 2,000 years ago. We too find any number of ways to forget who we are.

Two years ago in the summer of 2022, I crisscrossed the country to convene listening groups of pastors from a wide variety of denominations. I visited San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; Sioux Center, Iowa; Baltimore, Maryland; Denver, Colorado to listen to how pastors describe today’s preaching and worship environment. What has a decade or more of fierce partisan divides in the U.S. done to the church? What did the pandemic do? Or perhaps better put, what did the pandemic *reveal*? The answer in too many churches was a whole lot of sorrow and sad realities.

It reminded me of a Kathleen Norris line from her spiritual memoir *Dakota*. Norris noted at one point that when she began attending a small South Dakota church, she discovered a group of people who, to use her words “were behaving about as badly as grown-ups can behave.”

So also disputes over COVID’s reality, masking, social distancing, the suspension for a time of in-person worship, vaccines: it all tore communities apart and sent many faithful pastors packing. And then there are all the other things a pastor can say now in prayer or in preaching that leads to trouble. Try to preach a sermon on justice from the prophet Amos and you are labeled “woke” and that’s it. Suggest there is such a thing as systemic racism in this country and that white nationalism has invaded the church and pastors discover some unsettling facts in how people react.

No, we don’t ever say “Let’s sin more so that God’s grace may abound.” But in our willingness to behave as badly as grown-ups know how to behave and in our resistance to see how a culture war mentality is shredding our larger union in Christ on any number of issues, well, we sometimes live like baptism never happened.

So to also the church today Paul says, “Shall we let nationalism, white supremacy, the politicization of all of life continue? Shall we allow ourselves to deride one another over issues that have nothing to do with our salvation and our union with Christ with and one another? *Me genoito!* By no means! No way! Are you nuts? Remember who you are. Reckon with the fact that you are alive to God and dead to the ways of the world and then proceed from there!”

Of course, this is a reminder we all need. We don’t have to consider extremes in the church to see ourselves in this picture. We all face temptations to cut corners in our lives, to go along to get along, to essentially take off our baptismal wedding ring at work, on vacation, at school, so as to hide from others and even from ourselves the reminder of who we really are in Christ. We all struggle to live out our baptismal identity.

And we none of us can do this at all without the grace of God’s Holy Spirit to stay with us, to prod us, to jog our spiritual memories. We need the grace of the Spirit to pick us up when we fall down, to dust us off and help us continue to limp along the way of following Christ. We don’t need to *decide* to sin more to let grace abound! Grace abounds to all of us even when we are trying our best! As a bumper sticker says, “Lead me not into temptation. I can find it myself.”

In preaching class at Calvin Seminary, students often wrestle with the fact that Paul’s letters contain so many imperatives. How can a person avoid preaching a message of works-righteousness, of the idea that we save ourselves by being good, given that most any 15-verse stretch of a Pauline epistle might contain 10 command statements on what to do and what not to do? So I remind students that for Paul the indicative always precedes the imperative. You have been baptized! Now act like it! Paul never says “Behave *so that* you can become worthy of being saved.” No, Paul’s commands always come down to one thing: “Be who you are! Be the person your baptism created.”

In closing I will note that I often warn my students to not switch up a key image at the end of a sermon. I know we have used the wedding ring as a symbol in this sermon but I wish to close with another image that is too good to pass up. (Just don't tell my students!)

One of the finest preachers in our CRC neck of the woods was a man named John Timmer. In a memorable sermon Timmer noted that a long while ago, men in Ireland who made their living as fishermen on the high seas each wore a heavy wool sweater, each with a distinct pattern. No two fishermen sweaters were alike and everyone knew which sweater went with which man. Why was this important? Because sometimes men were swept into the sea and drowned. And in the cold, brackish waters of the North Atlantic, it did not take long for a body to decompose beyond recognition. So when one of these hapless souls washed ashore, people would know who it was based on the sodden sweater on the corpse.

In other words, each man carried constantly on his body a reminder of death. And so also, Timmer said, we as baptized people need to wear our baptismal identity in Christ every day. We died. We drowned. But unlike a dead Irish fisherman, we were also revived and so now we need to, as Paul will say in Colossians 3, put on Christ almost like a wool sweater and wear this reminder of who we are every day.

“Just figure that you are alive to God in Christ! Count on it. Think that way by the grace of the Holy Spirit. People of God, be who you are! Be who you are and be thankful!”

Rev. Scott Hoezee