

June 21, 2020

*Fathers, Faith and the Future*

Shepherd's Grace Church

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? <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 have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>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. <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, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup>For whoever has died is freed from sin. <sup>8</sup>But if we have 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. (Romans 6: 1-11)

<sup>24</sup>"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; <sup>25</sup>it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! <sup>26</sup>"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup>What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. <sup>28</sup>Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup>Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup>And even the hairs of your head are all counted. <sup>31</sup>So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. <sup>32</sup>"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; <sup>33</sup>but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. <sup>34</sup>"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup>For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; <sup>36</sup>and one's foes will be members of one's own household. <sup>37</sup>Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup>and whoever does not take up the cross

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and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup>Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10: 24-39)

For those of you who heard this message preached on Sunday, you know that it was preached from my daughter's home in Richardson, TX. I sat in one of her rocking chairs and shared the message in part as a conversation with my father. Because the service was on Father's Day, dad was much on my mind.

I mused about asking him, "What do you think about the question Paul asks this morning?" "What are we to say about these things," Paul asks. I could imagine my dad sitting legs crossed in the other chair rocking and thinking pensively about my question. I am sure the first question he would ask (because my dad rarely answered a question without asking a question) would be, "What things?"

Our passage this morning does pick up in the middle of a thought, it seems. The things Paul is talking about are things most of us would have learned last week. In Romans 5: 1-11, we learned that we are justified by faith. I can hear my father asking, "What does Justification mean?" It means "Made Right" I answered and we are made right with God by faith.

Then, I can hear my dad asking, "By whose faith?" We spent most of last week discussing this very topic. If we are made right by our own faith, then we are made right with God just as Abraham was but that leaves us in a conundrum. If we can make ourselves right with God by our own faith then where is the need for Jesus. Still, we know that Abraham's faith was insufficient to make him right with God so there must be something more.

As I thought about how I might answer this question of my father's, I wandered through the explanation given by Paul. Boasting of what we have in Christ, we find ourselves as children of God. Boasting as children, we even boast of our suffering for that makes us of better character. Character gives us hope and hope never disappoints for in hope we have the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Then, as I mused about my conversation, the answer came to me. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. (Rom. 5: 6) My answer to my father would be we are justified, not by our own faith, but by the unwavering faith Christ has in the will of God! It was his faith, his trust that made the cross possible as a form of reconciliation. It is the faith of Christ that justifies us, for our own faith, like that of our fathers before us is lacking.

In considering what Paul was trying to say, I mused that my answer to my father's question would be that we are justified, not by anything we can do, but by the faith of Christ.

Then I could hear my dad ask the next question. "If we are justified by Christ, what can we say?" I could hear that little chuckle in his voice as he realized even as he asked the question, that this question is exactly where we started out. "What are we to say?"

"Should we just go on sinning?" as Paul asked? If we do, does not God's grace in the incredible act on the cross gain even more credibility? Of course, Paul answers his own question! "By no means!" But why not? Why not continue to remind ourselves when we act in ways contrary to God that God has already made things right with us by the cross and the actions of Christ suffering once for all of us!

The answer is in the character we must acquire. It was not just Christ who was crucified on the cross. It was all of us. All of our old selves that not literally, but actually died on the cross with him. Our old selves who willingly sinned because we who knew no better were slain with Christ on the cross so that that part of us might be completely dead even as Christ was completely dead, carrying our sin to the grave!

The answer is in our Baptism. It is in more than the words or the symbols! It is in the action and the accepting of that action. There are only two sacraments in the Church that we practice. The first is the "Lord's Supper." The second is Baptism. Both contain powerful symbols, but more than that, powerful opportunities for us to define our character.

In the Lord's Supper, as we prepare the meal, we speak the words of transformation that Jesus himself speaks on the night he is betrayed. "This is my body," he says. "Take and eat!" Of course, we do not eat the body actually...or do we? The answer is in the way we understand the actions of God.

The bread we bless becomes something else as we eat it. It becomes more than just a symbol. It becomes a form of energy. As I explain this, I always think of Bill Polling and his most appropriate image of God. Bill always said he thinks of God as "Pure Energy." If you know a truth of energy, I believe it helps you understand that which happens when we eat the bread of communion.

One law of energy is that it can never be lost or destroyed. It can be changed, just as energy is changed from gasoline into motion through the mechanical workings of a car. It cannot, however be lost. Once we understand this, we understand that the same effect is true with the energy we receive as we eat the bread defined as the "Body of Christ."

The bread, just as any food is transformed by our body into the energy we need as a human to live and move and have being. As the "Body of Christ" the energy becomes the living, moving, being action of God, who in the beginning gave energy to all life!

Thinking about this, we can begin to understand how this sacrament becomes more than just symbolism. The bread is not just a symbol of the "Body of Christ," it becomes the energy of Christ, that same energy from which all things came into being! (John 1)

While it is easier to comprehend the actions of God in the sacrament as only symbolic, how much more powerful to understand the forces and laws of nature at work in these elements and allow that God in Godself is at work in that which we eat and that which we drink!

Understanding the elements of baptism, the other sacrament in a similar way can also help us accept that there is more involved in the work of baptism than mere symbolism. Baptism is an act, first of death. In the gospels where the stories of Jesus' baptism are told, He surrenders His life. He goes down into the water and submits his life to death, trusting the will of God in order that it might be known that God's will be done!

On that very last night when he is about to be betrayed, that submission is made complete. He asks that the death before him might pass him by, but then adds, "Not my will but thy will be done!" Adding these words to the prayer invoke a total submission to God.

When we are baptized, we also submit our lives to God! We trust, just as Jesus, whom we emulate in this moment and we hand over our lives to God! As Paul says in this morning's scripture lesson, "Do you not know that when you are baptized into Christ, you are also baptized into His death?"

At this point, I can hear my dad's next question. What does it mean that we are baptized into Christ's death? Pondering that question, I could hear him add, "It sounds to me like we die with Christ."

You know, in this moment, I can almost see him in the rocking chair leaning forward just a little and waiting for my response. As I pause to frame my answer, I can hear him encouraging me. "Well, do we?"

In fact, the symbolic answer is "Yes." Symbolically, that is exactly what happens. Submersion in water symbolizes death. In that moment we are underwater, we are unable to breathe or sustain life as we know it. Symbolically, we do in fact die! Of course, those of us who have been baptized know that we do not actually die...or do we?

The promise, according to Paul is that we die with Christ! It is important to hear this distinction, and to know that Christ's death was not just a sleep until waking. It was total and complete and there was no life left in him! Yet, we know that was not and is not the end of the story. Christ's death was complete and total but God, who has the power to create something out of nothing raised him from the dead.

If God can create something out of nothing and raise Christ from the dead, can God not create something out of nothing in us as well. Remember who we are in God's eyes before Christ. We are nothing...sinners all of us worthy of only death. Should it be surprising therefore that this is exactly what God gives us?

Yes! Our death is complete and total and absolute. We die just as Christ died but we are raised up just as He was! Our death is total and complete and so is our resurrection. We rise, not to an old life, not to the sin that we lived in before baptism, but to a life that is in Christ.

As Paul says, "Just as we were dead in Christ, we were raised in Christ to a new life!" Our death was absolute! It was total and complete. There was no old life, no sin life, no possibility of that which was living to live. Yet out of that death, God said, "Let there be light!" Out of nothing, there was something.

Our baptism is not just a symbol. It is a statement of faith. It is an affirmation of what Christ invites us to do in Matthew's gospel this morning. It is the willingness to take up the cross and follow Him. It is a realization that the cross upon which He is crucified, we also are crucified to our old self. Our baptism is a trust that is sacred and true.

To those who do not believe, it is folly, but to those of us who have faith, it is the promise of life. (1Cor.2) So at this point I can imagine my dad saying, "So, what does the cross mean?" And I smile! There are not many things I have

absolute confidence in as I think about working out my own faith and salvation, but this one thing...this thing I believe with all my heart.

It would be fun to explain it to my dad, but I suspect that he already knows now. When Jesus says we must take up the cross and follow Him, he cannot mean taking up burdens or cares, that is the same ones that every one who is not a believer takes up. Even the unfaithful take up these things. They pay their bills, care for their families, struggle when they are sick, etc. The cross must be something other! It must be something so antithetical to the world that it can be recognized and yet not believed!

I imagine looking at my father at this point and quoting from an old song, "What can take away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus!" Then I would say to him, the cross carries with it the whole and full power of love! Only love is able to overcome hate! Only love is able to overcome infidelity. Only love is able to overcome whatever sin we might carry! The cross we carry is the burden of love!

The burden reminds us by its weight that love exists beyond what is easy. Love exists beyond what is convenient. Love exists beyond what is in our own self-interest. Love puts the other first and cares for their welfare beyond our own. "the blood of Jesus" washes away our sin because the blood is that which exemplifies the love God has for us! The cross we carry is the love we have for one another!

On this Father's Day, I look over at the rocking chair next to mine and realize that my father is no longer there. My imagination has served me well this morning and I have enjoyed the chat I might have had with my dad, but I am also reminded that I have not enjoyed his presence as much as I love his absence.

The apostle Paul tells us in another place in scripture, "Absent in the body, Present in the Lord!" Because of what Christ has done on the cross, we are now free from sin. We are free in this life and we are free to live. Difficult as it is to imagine, we are a forgiven and favored people, we Christians. Our sins have been washed away.

As I share this message from my daughter's home this morning, some are watching in our sanctuary in Ark City. Those who are present there are invited to look at the symbolic cross we have there in the sanctuary. We have left the cross up a little longer this year because of the unusual nature of the year. Still, the meaning reminds us and maybe especially reminds us this morning of a deeper meaning.

Back in February before the world was turned upside down, I asked all who attended the Ash Wednesday service to write their sins on sheets of paper. We kept those sheets of paper on the altar even when we could no longer meet because of Covid. When we returned, Good Friday had already passed. The sins had transferred to the cross.

We came to understand that that which we had written had been carried to the cross with Christ. He took the sins of all of us, those we acknowledged and those we did not even know and carried them to the cross for us. So great was His love that he left none behind. He bore them all. As he hung there, bleeding and dying, His great love for us was second on His mind.

Earlier, I spoke of Jesus' trust for God, a complete and total trust. That trust in the will of God was the only thing greater than His love for us as he died a most painful death. Near the end, He let the two events, His love and His trust merge as one and He cried out in love and with full confidence, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do!"

On that Good Friday, Jesus breathed his last and was taken down, completely dead! Over time, the body He took as a human being would decay and be left to dust. That is what should have happened.

As I sit in my daughter's home this morning, I am certain that that is what happened to my father. He died and was cremated never having had a chance to see this place where I sit now. From the chair where I sit, I can look around and see the home this house has become. Strewn about are the toys of my grandson, James. A fresh and joy-filled reminder that for generations to come, stories could be told of my father and the incredible man he is.

The responsibility for those stories is mine. As his grandfather, it is my privilege to tell James of his grandfather who he never knew. It is my privilege to share with him stories that he can share with his children and his children's children!

It is my responsibility to mix those stories with all the other stories that surround him in this home. I get to look at the pictures of my daughter's wedding and the place where she and Craig were married. I get to tell James that this place was such a beautiful spot and that when the sun hit his mother's face in just the right way she looked exactly like her mother. I get to tell him that the place where the wedding took place was one of my father's favorite places in the world; how he loved the mountains and how he loved exploring them.

I get to tell him about the adventures we had hiking and camping and I if I am fortunate enough, I get to take him to some of the places and some of the adventures and share them with him so he can share them with his children!

When Christ was laid in the tomb, he was nothing. He was dead. He was what we all were before him; lifeless and without hope. And yet, there was out of nothing, something. There was God and the unbroken bond of trust Jesus had in Him!

It was as if God spoke and said once again, "Let there be light," and there was light! It was the light that had come into the world and the darkness could not overcome it! It was the light shining in the darkness of that stone cold tomb that brought renewed hope to the world.

It is this light that brings hope and promise to this father's day. That God could find a way to restore the body and the memory of my father and of all of your fathers, regardless of their sins which have been forgiven by God fully and completely.

I know some have fathers in this world who have feet of clay, who have committed sins against them and others. Their sins have consequence in this world and they should. One day, however that consequence will be overcome and all of us will stand together because of the work of Christ. His death has given life to all and his death makes possible the forgiveness of even the most vile sinner.

If you carry such memories today, I pray that those memories might be eased by the privilege we all have, the privilege of sharing with the next generations the pictures, the images, the promise of Christ; that if we take up His cross, the cross of love and in it, we can rejoice.

Our baptism leaves us dead to our old self, the self unable to look past the bitterness and hatred we experience now and look forward to the promise born out by love and trust on the cross. This morning, this Father's Day morning, I invite all of you to look around, wherever you are and imagine sharing the message of friends and family and Christ with those who are our responsibility.

Have a great Father's day and know that we are a forgiven people; dead in Christ and risen like Him to a new life, a life filled with the purpose and promise of the next generation. Amen!