

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button

Occasion: 2 Pentecost

Date: June 22, 2014

Theme: “Baptized in Death to Live”

Text: Romans 6:1b-11

NRS Romans 6

^bShould we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore 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.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We 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. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

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

In just the last week our community in Christ has been shaken by two profound losses. First came the loss of our beloved, long-time member Elsie Schott, whose passing, though expected, has nonetheless left us feeling diminished. Then came the death of our equally beloved, long-time member Katie Young, whose passing was totally unexpected and has left us feeling vulnerable. Two deaths of two so dear so close in time cannot but raise in our minds the very question that St. Paul asks in his Letter to the Romans: “What then are we to say about these things?” (8:31). How are we to respond to these deaths, one anticipated and the other not, but both of which touch us in the core of our being? Such questions drive us to the heart of Paul’s message in today’s Second Reading from Romans: Baptism.



For Paul, Baptism is the pivot point on which our lives turns from death to life, from diminishment to abundance, from mortality to eternity.

Give thanks that you have lived through a period of intense baptismal renewal in the life of the church. In some previous generations baptism was often pushed to the margins of church life, taken out of assembly worship, becoming more of a family affair, what the Methodist Bishop of North Alabama William Willimon once called “a sweet little rosebud of a thing.” Baptism had become domesticated, easy, culturally conventional, bereft of the drama, intensity, and danger of Baptism as practiced in the early church. This is an image of an ancient baptistry, discovered in Israel in the Negev desert, dating from somewhere between 250-600 a.d.



In the first centuries of Christianity baptisms weren’t scheduled willy-nilly, but instead were reserved for the highest, holiest days of the church year, most especially the Vigil of Easter. The forty days of Lent were dedicated to intense, daily instruction of the baptismal candidates. On the night of the Vigil, they would, in a litany of extended readings, be immersed in the history of salvation, beginning with the story of creation and ending with the promise of re-creation. Then in the moments before Easter dawn, they would be turned so that their backs faced the darkened

west, whereupon they would one by one remove their clothes and naked be submerged in the baptismal waters. Each candidate would walk into the cross-shaped waters, sometimes carrying their own infants and children, emerging to face the Easter sunrise where they would then be clothed in a white garment, symbolic of putting on Christ. (Just in case you're wondering, and I know some of you are, these baptisms were not co-ed. There was no group skinny-dipping in the early church. There were rules!)

My point here is that the early church found a way to liturgically enact exactly the theology of Baptism that Paul lays out in Romans 6.

In the chapters leading up to this morning's lesson, Paul has made a powerful, compelling argument for the total sufficiency of God's grace. Without our works but strictly by the merits of



Christ Jesus, God's grace saves us from the powers of sin, death, and the law. But like every great teacher, Paul anticipates the questions of his readers and asks them before they can even open their mouths. Hence, the question that leads off today's reading: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" In other words, "I like to sin. God likes to forgive my sin. So why not everybody just keep sinning away so that the Lord can keep pumping out the grace?" Having asked

the question, Paul immediately dismisses it, exclaiming, "By no means!" Paul responds that such reasoning runs absolutely counter to the meaning of Baptism, in which, says Paul, we are baptized into the death of Christ.



Does that strike anybody else as kind of odd, maybe even a little weird?

If Paul were, say, the pastor of a big, glitzy, 21st century mega-whatever, you might expect him to write that we are baptized into the life of Christ. (Not the death, but the life of Christ!) That's a message you can turn into a book that could make its way onto the bestseller list, upbeat and uplifting and definitely on the sunny side. But no. Paul says no such thing. He insists that we are baptized into the death of Christ, and even more darkly, that we are buried with Christ by baptism into death. Yikes. Paul says almost exactly the same thing about the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord's Supper, when he tells the church in Corinth, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

This is probably one of the big reasons that some people don't like Paul.

Besides being occasionally cranky, sometimes brusque, now and then maybe a little chauvinistic, Paul is in his letters almost always – relentlessly -- deep, often dark, and invariably serious. He doesn't tell stories. He doesn't crack jokes. I'm not sure how much fun he would be at a party. He can't even talk about joyous, wondrous, amazing Baptism without bringing up death. So what's with this guy? Maybe if he had got out more, had some fun, you know?

Paul may not fit the profile of a wild and crazy guy, but this much Paul understood with unflinching clarity: we all die.

I say “we all,” although I’m personally holding onto the possibility that an exception will be made for me, but Paul insists, nope. Doubtful. Don’t count on it. Paul himself thought that the last generation of humans alive when Christ returns might not see death, but otherwise, we all die. We hope later than sooner, easier than harder, happier than sadder, but birth and death define human life as we know it. Maybe someday some geneticist will find a way to turn off the biological switches that control cell death, but when that happens we will no longer be human in any way recognizable to past history. Death is a given, but what death? That, for Paul, is the question.

There is, on the one hand, the death that is the wages of sin. This is the death that closes us in on ourselves and closes us off from our source of life in God. This is the death that shrinks our hearts and empties our souls. This is the death that dries up the milk of human kindness and turns us instead into shrewd animals ever angling for our advantage, whatever cost that may impose on others. This is the death that the great, Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard described as the death without end, death without dying, death eternal, everlasting, forever. (He’s another guy that would not make a great party companion.) But Paul proclaims another death.



Paul proclaims the death of Christ. The death of Christ is the death of death, the death of sin, the death of the law’s stinging, accusing power. Christ’s death leads not to the long, dark halls of oblivion, but Christ’s death opens onto the courts of the Lord’s house. In, with, through, by, and on account of Christ’s death, the gates of heaven are flung open and the light of God pours over us. Instead of life nasty, brutish, and short, Christ’s death makes life tender, sweet, and amazingly gracious, to be shared rather than hoarded. In other words, Christ’s death leads to resurrection.

To be baptized is to be baptized into Christ’s death. Immersed, submerged, sealed in the death of Christ, we rise from the waters of Baptism, in Paul’s words, to “walk in newness of life.”



What does that mean? It means we live in faith, rather than fear. We live in hope, rather than desperation. We live with love as our compass, rather than charting our lives to the calculus of enlightened self-interest. We live daily dying and daily rising with Christ, burying the old self with him as we rise with him to resurrection promise.

In Baptism Elsie and Katie were baptized into the death of Christ. What’s more they claimed their baptisms as the center of their lives, living out of the death of Christ to bring light, life, and joy to others.

In, with, and through the baptismal ties we share we live with them and they with us in a unity that not even death can sever. By the death of Christ we live in a community, a mystical body, that spans all time and space, that knows neither limit nor boundary, that endures whatever assault that the devil may launch.

We will miss Elsie and Katie. We will feel the sharp sting of their absence. But only for a while, for by Christ's death, out of which we live and move and have our being, we are and shall ever be one people sealed in the one love of God.

