

July 14, 2019
The Territory of Grace
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Romans 6:1-11

What should we say? Should we keep on sinning, so that God's wonderful kindness will show up even better? ²No, we should not! If we are dead to sin, how can we go on sinning? ³Don't you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized also share in his death? ⁴When we were baptized, we died and were buried with Christ. We were baptized so that we would live a new life, as Christ was raised to life by the glory of God the Father.

⁵If we shared in Jesus' death by being baptized, we will be raised to life with him. ⁶We know that the persons we used to be were nailed to the cross with Jesus. This was done, so that our sinful bodies would no longer be the slaves of sin. ⁷We know that sin doesn't have power over dead people.

*⁸As surely as we died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him. ⁹We know that death no longer has any power over Christ. He died and was raised to life, never again to die. ¹⁰When Christ died, he died for sin once and for all. But now he is alive, and he lives only for God. ¹¹In the same way, you must think of yourselves as dead to the power of sin. But Christ Jesus has given life to you, and you live for God.
(Contemporary English Version)*

My daughter and son-in-law had two ladies at their front door yesterday, sharing their faith. They showed them the article in the newspaper about the man who killed himself so horribly, right in front of the police, and they asked, *Do you know why there is so much suffering?* My son-in-law asked me what to say to answer that. I said "It's not a mystery, Jeremy. There's so much suffering *because people are . . . jerks.* (I might possibly have used a different word.) *And people are jerks because they are afraid.*"

And people are afraid, because they still don't believe that there is nothing in this world to fear. Whether we live or we die, whether we are saints or jerks, the kindness of God has final say in this universe. *And if we only believed that, heart, mind, soul, and strength, there'd never be anything to defend; nothing worth hurting another human being to have; no payoff in being a jerk.* Suffering wouldn't end, but the rates *would plummet*, and most of what was left wouldn't feel like suffering.

If the book of Romans is starting to sound a little repetitive, as if Paul says the same thing over and over, it could be because Paul is saying pretty much the same thing over and over. Which is what teachers do when they are teaching to mastery – instead of grade level, if you will. Repetition and reinforcement. Paul is repeating and reinforcing. If the church doesn't master this new reality that God in Jesus Christ has re-created reality so that the kindness of God, that is the grace of God, has the final say in all that happens – if we don't master that, heart, mind, soul, and strength – we, the church, will never function as the body of Christ in the world.

To date, the church has been something of a slow learner. Great pockets of Christendom still function as if Jesus lived, died, and rose from the grave so that we would know to be nice to each other and help the poor and have something to do on Sunday mornings. All the while, Paul has preached his heart out to anyone who will listen that there is more: Jesus lived and died and rose from the grave so we wouldn't be afraid, so that we would live like people who have no cause for fear and therefore no cause, no motivation, to be such terrible jerks.

Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead, because God decided **not** to leave humanity to ourselves, to act our inevitable drama of self-destruction. We are a basketful of wretched sinfulness whom, against all reason, God chose to deal with kindly, mercifully, gracefully. Every word, you know, is a metaphor. And every metaphor limps, even the best ones. *Sin* and *grace* are Paul's metaphors as he attempts to describe the human-God relationship.

Sin refers to the way of life before baptism, before one's realization of the re-creation of the world in Jesus Christ or, as we commonly say it, sin is the way of life before faith in Christ. *Grace is the wide-open reality of God's love that permeates every nook and cranny of every cell of every creature, plant, and rock of creation* – every shimmer of light, every wisp of air, every drop of water, *every breath drawn by whatever draws breath.*

Sin and grace for Paul in Romans 6 is a kind of before-and-after in one's life, divided by the realization of faith. The dividing moment for Paul was on the road in Damascus. His life before was a project of genocide, executing Jews who believed in Christ. After, the project of Paul's life, as he described it, was to be poured out as a sacrifice in imitation of what Christ has done for us – that the world might have a living, breathing presence of Christ in the world: the church.

Paul says we must live always in the *after* in this new creation of the world in Christ Jesus. We cannot practice faith in Jesus while standing in the grave of the past. Of all we might find useful in this text today, I hope to find some encouragement for anyone who has ever had trouble believing the past no longer has any power over you. Because the word of the Lord on that subject today is, simply, "Nope."

Would you pray with me? *Upon every heart still haunted by hurts from the past, O God, may your word be a healing touch. We all struggle sometimes to believe news this good, that we live inside the territory of grace, a land utterly without borders, where the past is a grave – a grave with no hold on us, where we are welcomed exactly as we are. Amen.*

Do you suppose Paul's past haunted him? He was no victim, after all. He was a predator. Like a modern day ICE agent going from synagogue to synagogue, notebook in hand, talking to rabbis, wanting to know who in your congregation professes to believe in this Jesus fellow? Then taking that list to Jewish authorities and trading them for arrest warrants, which he then used to track down those people, arrest them, throw them in the jail, and have them executed. So yes, I suspect the memory haunted him.

And yet, he still wrote and believed this: ³*Don't you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized also share in his death?* ⁴*When we were baptized, we died and were buried with*

Christ. We were baptized, so that we would live a new life, as Christ was raised to life by the glory of God the Father.

And this: When Christ died, he died for sin once and for all. But now he is alive, and he lives only for God. ¹¹ In the same way, you must think of yourselves as dead to the power of sin. But Christ Jesus has given life to you, and you live for God.

Bushi Yamato Damashii calls himself a Buddhist monk and a friend of Jesus. If he was not a Baptist preacher at some point in his past I will eat ... well ... *asparagus*. Because he has the voice. In that voice that I could listen to all day, he says that the hurtful moments of our past no longer exist anywhere in the universe, except when we reconstitute them in our minds – something always done by choice, by the choice not to train our minds to stay here.

Choose other, Paul says. In a moment in which you are tempted to go to that place of sin and death – a place dead and buried not because Dr. Phil said or your therapist said so, but because the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe made it so – think of yourselves as dead to the power of all that hurt, all that sin. Be here. Be now. Be alive in this life God has made for you.

Don't hear me hating on therapy – it's good for what it's good for. But there is no substitute for the spiritual discovery that God loves you and you are worthy of being loved, that you deserve the ground you occupy and the air you breathe, because God said so.

Friends, please see how the pain of something, however overwhelming in its memory, can never render the truth untrue. Grief and sadness don't have that power. Neither do guilt or shame or disappointment. They are feelings. Feelings are real. But the only power they have, we give them. And when, rather than believe the truth is the truth, we believe our feelings and the thoughts those feelings get us to thinking, we have returned to a grave to pray and plead for God's help to get through life in a place God went to great length to get us out of.

Remember those Hebrew slaves begging to go back to Egypt? Freedom sounded like a good idea, until they realized how much trust was involved, how little control over their own situation was allowed. For all our wishing to be healed of the past, and our frustration with the pain, something about it draws us back, like peeling the scab off a wound. It hurts like the dickens but feels strangely satisfying too.

Maybe it's the comfort of being perpetually wounded. It's unpleasant and inconvenient, but it's also familiar, predictable, dependable. But is it? Or is that familiarity and dependability something else we tell ourselves rather than believe the God who chose to look at humanity when we looked pretty much the same as we do right now – a mess on the verge of self-destruction – and said, "Nope, I love them too much for that."

Why, friends, why is it so hard to believe God loves you that much? Is it because to believe that you'd finally have to give up on changing the past? As if you could. Lisa occasionally shares my favorite quote: "I have given up all hope of having a better past."

Do you know the book *11/22/63*? It is a novel by Stephen King in which a man named Jake goes into a diner owned by a man named Al who sells hamburgers for \$1 because he is able to buy his meat at 1958 prices. Eventually Jake learns that Al's basement door is a portal into 1958, and they conspire for Jake to go back to 1958 and thus change the course of history by thwarting the assassination of President Kennedy and thus preventing the Vietnam War along with the entire course of American history up to 2011. As with every King novel, the story isn't over until the very last word on the very last page, where one is both deeply satisfied by the brilliant storytelling and sadly surprised to realize you knew the truth all along.

Even in a fantasy, we cannot rewrite or redo the past. All we can do with the past is lay it to rest as gently and lovingly as possible. Release it, completely, knowing it has no power over us. None. Zero. Zilch. We live here, now, in a borderless land. "The territory of grace" one writer called it, also called the universe ruled by God's kindness, populated by folks like you and me, all dressed up in these lives of ours – lives made new.

Would you pray with me?