

Buried With Him in Baptism: A Sermon

Gen. 21:8-21

Rom. 6:1b-11

Matt. 10:24-39



What does it mean when a preacher finds himself facing the same kinds of lectionary readings over and over again? I am one of the three new faculty at Trinity this year, and I have now preached a number of times. In the last two sermons I preached, the issue of moral transformation and Christian discipleship was a key theme in the lectionary readings. In terms of Reformation theology, this is a topic that sometimes falls under a category called the “third use of the law.” This is an area that was somewhat controversial on this campus last year – the year before I arrived. So, as a new faculty member, I was understandably reluctant to preach on the topic. But there it was in the readings. So I preached on the readings.

I turn to the readings for this morning, and what do I find? In the gospel reading for this morning, we hear: “Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 10: 38-39) Turning to the epistle, we find the central discussion of baptism in Paul’s letters. The reading begins with the question: “Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6: 1) So there it is again. Moral imperatives! The third use of the law! I am quite tempted to preach on the OT lesson about Hagar and Ishmael.

But perhaps, in God's providence, the readings are there for a reason. Perhaps we at Trinity need to hear this message again. It is just as likely I think that I need to hear it, for I can hardly claim that I'm even close to getting a handle on this Christian discipleship thing.

So this morning, I will try to say something about Paul's discussion of baptism in Romans 6 and ask how Paul's discussion touches on the question "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" How then does Paul's understanding of baptism relate to the question of freedom from sin?

To begin with, we need to note that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are at the heart of Paul's theology. Everything else Paul talks about is somehow related to the significance of Christ's dying and rising again. When Paul talks about salvation, he always uses language about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and particularly about his crucifixion. So, in 2 Cor. 5: 14, Paul says that because one has died, therefore all have died. In 1 Cor. 15: 22, he says that as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. And in Romans 5, the chapter just before the one we read this morning, Paul uses the Adam/Christ language again: "As one trespass led to condemnation for all, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." (5:18) We find the same kind of crucifixion/ resurrection language in this morning's epistle: "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, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (6:3)

When Paul talks about how God brings salvation to sinful human beings through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, he uses three kinds of language: the legal language of justification by faith; the language of union with or

participation in Christ, and, finally, language about the gift of the Spirit. In addition, and this is very important, the background to all three kinds of language is Paul's understanding of eschatology. Paul sees the resurrection of Christ as an anticipation of God's act on the last day when he will judge and re-create the world. In other words, Jesus' resurrection is a foretaste of the new creation – a preview of coming attractions.

How does the church fit into Paul's eschatology? We Christians live between the times of Jesus' resurrection and Jesus' return in glory on the last day. Students here at Trinity have learned to talk about this eschatological tension using the language of the "already" and the "not yet."

Paul interprets all three kinds of language through the lens of this eschatological tension between the resurrection of Jesus and his final return. So the juridical language of justification is an anticipation of God's final judgment – through faith in Christ we already anticipate the acquittal of God's final judgment that has not yet taken place; Paul talks about union with Christ in terms of the language of re-creation: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." (2 Cor. 5:17) In some sense, we already live in the new creation that has not yet arrived. Paul talks about the Holy Spirit as the down payment or the first-fruits of the final redemption that is not yet here.

So justification, union with Christ, gift of the Spirit, all as anticipation of something that is already here, but not yet complete. That's a real quick summary of Paul's entire soteriology in one sentence.

The important thing to focus on is that we cannot isolate any of Paul's different ways of talking about salvation without distorting his message. If we separate the juridical language of justification from the union language of being one with Christ, then salvation will be reduced to a legal fiction –

the caricature of Protestant understandings of salvation. If we separate the "in Christ" language of union from the juridical language of forgiveness, then our salvation becomes dependent on our ability to live a Christ-like life—and there is no hope for sinners. If the Spirit language is separated from the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ associated with justification and sanctification, then we have all of the excesses of enthusiasm. In one of my favorite quotes from Luther, some people talk as if they have swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all!

So what is happening in Paul's discussion of baptism in Romans 6? In Romans 6, we seem to have a transition between the two other kinds of language that Paul uses to talk about salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. In chapters 1-6, Paul has focused on the legal or juridical language of justification by faith. In these chapters, Paul contrasts judgment and condemnation with justification and acquittal. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith," says Paul, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (5:1) In chapter 8, Paul focuses on the gift of the Spirit: "But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you." (8:10-11). Notice that, as Paul earlier had related justification to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, he also relates the giving of the Spirit to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here in chapter 6, Paul focuses on union with Christ language, associated with baptism. Water baptism is baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. As justification leads to freedom from condemnation and guilt, and as the indwelling Spirit enables us to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh, so in baptism we are united to Christ's death and

resurrection; we have died to sin, and we are alive to God.

The lead into this discussion is Paul's response to a possible accusation that might have been raised by his use of forensic justification language. Does God's pardon of sin in justification lead to moral license? Since, through faith in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, we no longer stand condemned by the law, are we now free to do whatever we would like? Does Christ set us free to sin?

Paul's answer is interesting. He answers the question by refusing to answer it in the sense in which it was asked. Paul's entire discussion in the first chapters of Romans had assumed a forensic or legal context, and the question assumes the same context. Yet Paul answers by showing that the legal context is not all there is. Salvation is not only about forgiveness and pardon and freedom from judgment. It is also about transformation and a new kind of life and moral freedom.

Paul's discussion in these chapters raises interesting questions, the kinds of questions that theologians love to ask. Yet many of the questions that theologians ask presume that Paul's language of judgment, union with Christ, and gift of the Spirit refers to distinct and separate realities. It seems rather that Paul is using different language to talk about different facets of a single reality. What theologians like to separate, Paul prefers to keep together.

So the theologian might ask whether Paul's discussion in Romans implies the existence of an *ordo salutis* – an order of salvation. Does justification by faith lead to baptism, which leads to reception of the Spirit? While theologians might like to make these logical distinctions, Paul himself does not seem to separate these steps. Baptism and faith are simply the corresponding objective and subjective sides to the same event. In that sense, the traditional understanding of the sacrament as an outward sign of an inward reality makes sense. Faith is the subjective response to God's work in Christ, and

baptism is faith's external objective counterpart. Justification, union with Christ, and reception of the Spirit all take place in the one act of faith/baptism.

Again, it is important to note that for Paul, baptism is not a thing in itself. All three of the ways in which Paul talks about salvation—justification by faith, baptism as union with Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit – point beyond themselves to look to Christ's death and resurrection. Justification by faith is not about my faith as a subjective event, but about my looking away from myself to God's finished work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism does not have significance as an act in itself. It is not magic. Rather baptism unites me with Jesus Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection. Paul says, "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." (6:5) Similarly, the indwelling Holy Spirit seems to be the connecting link between faith and baptism and the crucified and risen Christ. Paul says: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you." (8:11)

But if baptism is not a thing in itself, but rather unites us to the crucified and risen Christ, and is only one of the three ways in which Paul talks about how we are saved through Christ's death and resurrection, then this cuts through some of the misleading ways people in the church sometimes talk about baptism. For example, baptism is not an automatic membership card bestowing automatic rights and privileges to the possessor. Paul presupposes that the person being baptized has renounced a past life of sin and has a lively faith. In churches that practice infant baptism (like our own), the external sacramental act and the internal response of faith are necessarily separated in time, but they cannot be theologically separated. Baptism unites us to Christ, but in a

way that implies discipleship. Paul's rebuttal to those who presume that faith and baptism can be separated from moral behavior is: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (6:4)

There is, of course, a communal dimension to this. Baptism brings us into the church. But to be baptized means to move from one community to another. Paul's language of death and rebirth implies we are leaving behind one way of life and assuming another. The language in this morning's gospel reading provides an echo of what this means. Jesus says: "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 10:38-39) To be baptized into Christ does not then mean what is sometimes called "inclusiveness" – everyone is welcome; there are no demands; come as you are; stay as you are. No, the inclusiveness in Christian baptism is inclusion (or better incorporation) into Christ's death and resurrection, being included in a way that leads to losing one's life in order to find it.

At the same time, and just as important, Paul speaks of the holiness associated with baptism as a consequence of our union with Christ, not its condition. It is because we have been united with Christ in baptism that we are not to continue in sin. Our freedom from sin is not a condition of our being united with Christ. Heaven forbid that our own attempts at holiness would be the ticket that would make us worthy of baptism. Apart from Christ, we have no such holiness. As Paul said earlier in Romans, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (5:6-8)

Baptism is for sinners.

Finally, we might ask whether the holiness that Paul speaks of as a consequence of our baptism is something that we have a right to expect or a duty to demand all at once – something that we can point to as a done deal, once and for all? If so, it would seem that some of us are in real trouble. We have the promise and demand of freedom from sin, but too often we lack the reality.

The tension that is inherent in Paul's already and not yet eschatology is perhaps helpful here. Paul speaks of dying in Christ in the aorist past tense: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (6:3) But Paul speaks of our resurrection in the future tense. "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." (6:5) My reading of Paul, and other parts of the New Testament is that holiness is not an instant process, but an ongoing pilgrimage. There is no instantaneous "second blessing" that makes us suddenly holy, once for all. We are viators, pilgrims, living between the times.

Because we have been united with Christ in his death, we are dead to sin. Yet we do still sin. Unfortunately, we should expect to sin. We never grow beyond being justified by faith. Yet we also live in hope of future resurrection. The Spirit who raised Jesus will give life to our mortal bodies. Sanctification is a real transformation that brings about real change even now. In the two verses after the passage we read this morning, Paul says: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their 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." (6: 12-13). That is a demand, but also a promise. Union with Christ brings about real moral freedom and change, even now. And would we want it otherwise? Forgiveness

that simply left us to wallow in our sins would be no real salvation. And yet, the transformation is often a slow and gradual one, with bits and starts, many failures, but also real victories.

The great Anglican priest and poet George Herbert shows the tension with which Christians often live. In a poem entitled "Sin's Round," Herbert begins and ends the poem with a repetitive rhyme scheme that emphasizes the human plight. At the beginning, he pleads his regret:

Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am

That my offences course it in a ring.

Yet at the ending, the poet finds himself back where he began:

Yet ill deeds loiter not: for they supply

New thoughts of sinning; wherefore, to my shame,

Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am.

Fortunately, the tale does not end there. Jesus has risen from the dead, and we are raised with him. Herbert follows Paul in understanding salvation to be a participation in Christ's death and resurrection. In a poem entitled "Easter," Herbert prays:

Arise sad heart; if thou dost not withstand,

Christ's resurrection thine may be;

Do not by hanging down break from the hand,

Which as it riseth, raiseth thee.

It is in union with the crucified and risen Christ that we experience the freedom that sets us free from sin's bondage. So we close with another poem by George Herbert:

Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine.

If mine I am, and thine much more.

Than I or ought, or can be mine

Yet to be thine, doth me restore. ("Clasping of Hands")

Amen.