

Romans 6: 1-11 "Be Yourself" Rev. Janet Chapman 7/16/17

It is good to be back from our national assembly in Indianapolis where we celebrated our oneness in Christ which supersedes all the walls and boundaries we erect to keep ourselves separate from one another. As I stood among Texas friends, I quickly picked up that extra syllable that manages to sneak into the dialect so as to draw out whatever we might have to sa-ay. When I was among my Midwest friends, the phrase y'all quickly reclaimed its rightful presence in my talk and when I had lunch with a good friend from Alabama, that catch phrase, "we're fixin' to" got stuck in my brain. By far the biggest cultural shock came when I stood in front of an African American congregation to talk and they were all about talkin' back – not in a bad sense but with encouraging "Amens" and "Alrights" – I can see how one can go on for hours like that because you get in this rhythm of give and take that is hard to reel in for a preacher, but it is important to keep in mind where the focus must stay. It isn't to build up our egos but to worship God and keep God at the center of all that happens. Many of the folks I met in that small little church live far below the poverty level, but they didn't complain, only praised God even more for the privilege of having a church to even worship within, having been without a building for many years. I believe they gave to me far more than I gave to them. I did have a rather unique opportunity to sit next to one of my former youth from youth ministry days at the Brite Seminary luncheon. Gabe is now pastoring a church in Kentucky and has turned out to be an insightful theologian. He was in my youth group at a time when I was into all kinds of daring endeavors. I think his baptism class was the first group I teased about trying a new form of baptism never before attempted where the pastor and baptismal candidate climb up a 10 foot ladder installed over the baptistry and the candidate is strapped into bungee straps so that we can offer bungee baptisms. The Board didn't think I was funny.

I must confess that I have had several unusual baptisms in my time as a pastor. One parent pulled me aside and offered me a \$20 to keep his child under the water a few extra minutes just to ensure it took. During one particularly cold winter, the heater wasn't working in the church nor in the

baptistry and I swear I broke ice away from the walls as I was getting in. This is the first church I've ever served that didn't have a baptistry so a pre-check of the swimming pool was a must and I am grateful to say the Lawrences' is absolutely beautiful. It's a rough life but someone has to check out the pools beforehand so I struggle through.

As you may remember, in Jesus' day, baptisms were done not in a baptistry or a pool but in a river or lake, and originated with people like John the Baptist who baptized for the forgiveness of sins. However, with Jesus' baptism, a new understanding of identity took shape which became even more life-changing than the forgiveness of sin. The apostle Paul helps us process this new significance and gives us a glimpse into the radical new possibilities inherent in baptism. We still teach baptism as a washing clean of our sins but with a twist made real by the death and resurrection of Christ. For those being baptized today and for all of us who have experienced the waters of baptism, we are reminded that recognition of our sins is the first step in our baptisms. When we recognize that something has been wrong in our lives, then we can move forward toward setting it right again. As you may have witnessed in last Sunday's Teen Challenge worship service, in order to get help, to get clean from whatever separates us from God and others, we have to admit there is a problem. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked. For those convinced the world is a disaster and nothing can be done to fix it, we devote ourselves to just trying to keep up in this fast-paced world – we compete, we achieve, we accumulate and we defend. We see therapists who help us maintain our boundaries and manage our guilt. We tend to our own business and trust others to tend to theirs, all the while trying to convince ourselves that this growing ache inside, this gaping hole, this sense of being cut off from what really matters, is normal. It is not a sign that something is wrong. It is just a pain to be gotten used to, like monthly cramps or hemorrhoids. Call it existential anxiety, call it the human condition, call it life and just deal with it.

If, on the other hand, you decide to call it sin from which you need help to overcome, then you have already made a radical shift in your reality. You have admitted that something is wrong and you have admitted your frailty. You are sick and tired of being sick and tired and want to be rid of that suffocating ache. If you have ever gotten to this point, Barbara Taylor notes, then you know how easy it is to glow like a furnace for a couple days, ready to start anew, make a change and be the person you are created to be, and then it gradually cools off until everything is back to what passes for “normal.” The sad part is that sometimes it is our friends and family who try and push us back into that old space of normal which they have always known us to be. They don’t want us to be someone new and different. Reynolds Price, the author, suffered from a rare form of spinal cancer in the mid-eighties and lost the use of his legs. His crisis wasn’t only physical but also spiritual, since his illness required him to change his entire way of life. What surprised him most, he said, was the resistance of his friends. He writes, “When we undergo huge traumas in middle life, everybody is in league with us to deny that the old life is ended. Everybody is trying to patch us up and get us back to who we were, when in fact what we need to be told is ‘You’re dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?’”

In essence, this is the question of our baptisms which Paul tries to teach in chapter 6 of Romans. Paul is trying to head off any misunderstandings about the relationship between sin and grace. In the previous verses from chapter 5, Paul describes the endless power of grace saying, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” However, he is worried that Christians might take this as encouragement to sin, to just live it up like the Prodigal Son, go back to the parent and get a party for coming home, and then do it all over again. “By no means!” Paul says in verse 6. Just because the power of grace outstrips the power of sin is no reason to keep sinning. A child spills an entire carton of milk on the floor and can’t stop crying because he feels so bad about it. The parent mops up the floor and says, “See now how the whole floor is nice and clean,” to which the child goes from tears to smiles saying, “Hey, maybe I should spill on the floor more often!” “You have got to be kidding,” says Paul, because to him the idea

of a sinful baptized person is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. “You are dead to sin,” says Paul, “so stop acting as if you were capable of sin. Be who you are.” This is where the twist comes in for those of us baptized in a death like Jesus’ and raised in a resurrection like his as Paul says. It is the reason in our tradition we practice immersion for baptism. When we go down into the water, we are emulating our death to sin and when we come back out of the water we are raised to new life, a new identity, being alive to God in Christ Jesus.

By your baptisms, you are dead to sin – who will you be now? Nishan Bakalian tells a story of meeting a woman in Armenia whom everyone called Palasan’s wife. She had her own name, of course, but townspeople called her by her husband’s name to show her great honor. When the devastating earthquake happened in Armenia in 88, it was nearly noon and Palasan was at work. He rushed to the elementary school where his son was a student. The façade was crumbling, but he entered the building and began pushing children outside to safety. After Palasan had managed to help 28 children, an aftershock hit that completely collapsed the building and killed him. So the people honor his memory and his young widow by calling her Palasan’s wife. When Christians are told to remember our baptisms, that does not mean so much remembering the time and place or people around you as much as it is a way of saying, “Remember who you are; remember who you are connected to in your baptism, that is, you are connected to Christ; you have died to sin and now you live a new life in Jesus Christ.” With each word and deed from baptism on, we ask ourselves if what we are doing, what we are saying, is befitting of a baptized follower of Christ’s. If not, then why are we trying to be something we are not? Young Jeremy who was being baptized decided to put it into his own words as he stopped the minister just before the dunking and said, “I want to say something. I am here today because of all of you,” as he looked around the congregation. “When my parents divorced, I thought my world was over. But you stood by me. You told me the stories of Jesus. And I just want to say thanks for what you did for me. I intend to make you proud as I’m going to try to live my life the way Jesus wants and I will not forget.”

There wasn't a dry eye in the group. Preacher David Bartlett says being told to remember that day of your baptism is like saying, "Be who you are; be who you are created to be; be yourself." Remember who you belong to. For Paul and his readers, our North American rugged individualism wouldn't have made any sense because everyone belongs to someone or something. To put it even more strongly, everyone is servant or slave to someone or something. Before baptism, we were slaves to sin. After baptism, we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

You have died to sin – who will you be? Who will you belong to? I remember a child dedication I did once where the baby was so cute and cuddly when we began the service. She was wide-eyed and looking at all the people around her. I picked her up to take her down the aisle to meet all the grandmas and grandpas who were dedicating themselves to embrace her as a part of the church family when her face began to wrinkle up a bit. At first, I thought it must be gas. I smiled at her and she looked at me making some goofy noises and then as if she was having some kind of internal biochemical reaction. She let out a huge scream and I promptly rushed back to her mom to carefully place her back in those familiar arms. As soon as I did, a huge smile came across her face. She knew the one to whom she belonged. This is a transformational truth. The primary identifying feature about you is not where you live or how you vote or how much money you have or where you came from or who your parents are or even your gender, race, or sexual orientation. It is that you are a child of God, and in baptism, we are reminded that this is who we are created to be. As Paul says in Galatians and I heard again this past week at General Assembly, "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." What we share in common – our identity in Christ Jesus – is far more significant than all of our differences.

Baptism is more than just getting cleaned up from our past mistakes, it is a looking forward to accepting our identity, being ourselves the way God intended it to be. So dear friends, remember your baptism, to whom you belong, and live your lives accordingly. Thanks be to God.