

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, May 21, 2023

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## Romans 6: 1-8

So, this will really end our Narrative Lectionary journey for this spring. We'll come back to it in the fall. Paul's been taking us through his epistle to Rome, to the early Church in Rome, and so we'll read from the sixth chapter of Romans this morning, verses one through eight. If you don't have your Bible with you, you can grab a blue pew Bible and follow along.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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.

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. 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. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we also live with him.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

In his commentary on Romans N.T Wright paints a beautiful scene, and I think it's helpful for us as we unpack this text from Romans today. Y'all all know the story of the Prodigal Son. The younger son of the family twists his father's arm to receive his inheritance early; then he goes off and he spends it all; and then he comes home, and he thinks he's coming home in utter disgrace; but to his astonishment—y'all know the story—to his astonishment when he's making his way down the road, what happens?! His father runs to him and embraces him and welcomes him home. And not just that, but he gives instructions to go and gather a whole bunch of food and to get everyone back together, and he throws the son a party. They celebrate and they rejoice together because as the father says, “This one that we thought was lost has been found. The son that I thought was no more has returned to me.” We all know that part of the story, but imagine, if you would, that we lingered there in the household. Imagine it's a year or two after this celebration that has welcomed him back into the fold of the family.

Imagine that a...a thought steals unbidden into the young man's mind. Life has settled back down to a reasonable humdrum existence once again. His older brother who was angry at his returning is now at least tolerating him.

His father has entrusted back into his care the work that they were doing daily before.

The son reflects, the prodigal does, just in a quiet moment the joy of being received by a running father that day, and he thinks to himself, “Suppose I did it again. Why not help myself to enough things to survive, then run away for a few weeks. Then I can play the penitent and come back again. Maybe they'll even throw me another party.”

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---

Perhaps you imagine it absurd or unthinkable, that you don't believe it; but this thought process is exactly what a great many people think and even do.

“God will forgive me; it's God's job,” declares a famous philosopher, just two centuries ago.

There's something about this story from Wright, this way that he paints the picture of the prodigal rethinking, that struck me this week. And I read Paul's question to the church in Rome, “Should we continue in sin in order that Grace may abound?”

“What if I did it again? Not only would I be welcomed home; I'm quite sure because it's my father's job to love me, but maybe I'll even be celebrated.”

But Paul immediately responds to his own question, “By no means,” and then poses another. “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

It's not so much that we wouldn't have the thought of the prodigal to sin again. Perhaps you, like I, have revisited things that you know are unhelpful or unhealthy for you. Perhaps you have diagnosed within your life something that feels like it separates you from the Lord, and you've gone for a while being very diligent about a practice of not doing that, but perhaps you've made your way back to it as well, either purposefully or just by accident.

Paul is quite clear that the work of Christ has accomplished something permanent and eternal, and yet Paul is also aware of what the human experience is like. And so Paul decides to address it head on.

In so doing he kind of outlines what is for us the power of Grace at work in the world and in our lives. Paul's contention is that Grace is something that ought to be and is truly life-changing, that the power of God at work in Grace, in forgiveness, ought to have the power and it indeed does to change us. Grace can change our hearts, our actions, our decision making. It can even change our posture toward our neighbors too. For Paul the change, the power that Grace has, is as real as dying and rising again in Christ. It is not some flippant idea. It is an eternal truth that is not only worth believing but committing to, and even when needed, resting in. What he is communicating to the early Church in Rome is that sin is indeed powerful, and if sin is a word that you struggle with, then think of anything that separates you from the will of God—whatever that is.

What Paul is saying to the Romans is that sin does not have the last word. Indeed Grace does. And not just that. Let me tell you what that looks like. It looks like your old self dying.

It looks like a... a vulnerable one hung up on a cross, crucified, an old self crucified alongside Christ.

And it looks like that because what Grace ultimately does is, it destroys the body of sin. It, as he says, “loosed the chains of enslavement.” Paul says in verse 6, “We know that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be

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enslaved to sin.” And it doesn't just look like something dying, it also looks like something rising. In verse 7 “For whoever has died is freed from sin.” And he goes on. There is something powerful about Grace that doesn't just cover our sin but, ultimately, untethers us from it. It frees us from sin and invites us into something brand new.

Christ died for our sin, as one theologian put it,” Christ died for sin that we should die to our sin.”

For Paul to the Romans it is important that they know that any distance they feel from God, by action or inaction, you might call sin. It doesn't have the last word. Grace does, and that's why in verse 4 he talks about this burying and then rising. “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, we too might walk in newness of life.” That's the key phrase here. It is not that sin is simply taken away or your distance from the Divine is taken away. It is that there is something brand new that is born in its place, and we are invited to walk in newness of life.

Paul also, I think, challenges the church to look inward.

He is challenging them to imagine for themselves what their sins might be, not just communally, but also personally. For us Presbyterians that might feel a little uncomfortable.

But I wonder if in the quiet moments of your week, it's not difficult for you to imagine the things that separate you from God or from neighbor. And I wonder what it might be for you to understand those things as things that Paul is talking about having passed away so that new life or newness of life might break forth, because the truth of the Gospel is that Christ did not come that we might spill much ink over the theology of the Cross or even sin or even forgiveness. Christ came so that the world and that your lives and my life might actually be different on the other side of his death and resurrection.

We are not here for theological navel-gazing. We are here because we believe that something can actually happen in our hearts that makes us brand new.

A friend of mine was telling a story this week about basketball season getting started back. This is an AAU summer league that's already starting up. Their daughter is a really talented basketball player—has been playing basketball since she was really small. I love following my friend on social media because most of their highlights are of home runs on the softball field or three-pointers on the basketball court. She loves basketball.

But last summer was a terrible summer for her. It was a terrible season—not because of her performance, although it did suffer—but because for some reason or another she just didn't want to go to practice. Not only that but she was discouraged, and you could tell, on edge and angry. It didn't take long for my friend to diagnose that she and her coach were at odds with each other. The style of coaching was not the style of coaching my friend's daughter wanted to receive, um,

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maybe a little harsher than one would desire even for their own children. But what my friend knew was that her daughter had suffered throughout the summer, and she doesn't like to see her daughter suffer. I'm sure none of us do.

And so she had hoped and prayed for the last school year that her daughter, although she loves to play basketball, might say, "I don't want to do AAU this summer. Let's just spend time at home or vacationing." And beyond that she'd also hope that that coach would say, "You know what? One season was enough." But y'all know where this is going, right? Just a month ago they were signing up for basketball for the summer, and they saw on the sign-up form the coach's name. And the daughter said, "No, I want to play. It's my favorite sport." My friend said, "She decided to play and he decided to coach, and that meant one thing for me—I had to stop hating him. I actually had to allow myself to be changed by the grace that I had proclaimed. I realized that, for me, I don't get to go on hating him and still call myself a Christian. Others might and that's okay, but for me, I can't do it. For me, I realized that something had to change in me, and I needed to even allow the spirit of God, if we do that, to change my heart."

That might seem like an inconsequential example for you, or maybe it hits really close to home.

Maybe there is someone that you can envision in your mind's eye that you have disdain for as well, maybe not just for them, but the way they have moved through the world.

It seems to me that part of what Paul is trying to communicate is that it is possible for our hearts and minds to be changed.

And so I started thinking about Paul's letter to the church in Rome. For us this week maybe it's an invitation to inventory.

Maybe it's an invitation or an opportunity to sit down and spend some time imagining, "What are those things that separate me from feeling fully aligned with the spirit of God in my life? What is it that diverts me from a path of love in the world?" Maybe it's people or ideas or practices. What I've realized in my life is when I do these sorts of inventories, I might come up with a couple of things, and I'll make a commitment. Maybe y'all do this in Lent, okay? Make a commitment not to practice something or to not engage in a particular, let's say gossip or whatever it is. Right? I go on that for a while, but man it draws you back. I wonder, though, what your inventory might reveal. Maybe it's a grudge that you're holding against someone; maybe it's a practice that you just need to stop; maybe it's a feeling that you've been holding on to for a really long time, and maybe we might understand that feeling as something that separates us from truly embodying the love of God in the world. And maybe if we could imagine it like that, maybe we might even call it sin.

So then the question is for us, Should we continue in sin in order that Grace may abound? By no means." How can we do that, actually, if we who have died to sin go on living in it? How does that work?

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Do we not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? That means that 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, we too might walk in newness of life.

Friends, if we have been united with him in a death like his, we trust and we believe that we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. So maybe this day we might go from this place, and we might know that our old self has been crucified with him, that sin has been destroyed, that we are no longer enslaved to it. And we might believe the gospel truth that Paul shared with the early Church in Rome, "That whoever has died is freed from sin, and if we have died with him, we will also live with him." So I invite you into a time of inventory. What is it this day that separates you from the love of God, that hinders or obstructs your path towards love and grace being shared in the world?

What lie have you believed that something other than Grace will have the last word, that sin does? Because it doesn't.

Friends, our invitation this day is to trust in the good news of the Gospel, that by the power of the spirit at work in and through the life and death and, indeed, resurrection of God, we are invited to walk in newness of life.

In the name of the Father and the Son the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.