

“Intermission”
Romans 6:1-14/Matthew 9:2-13
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I. Introduction/Review

“I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also the Greek.” (Rom. 1:16)

With this Paul begins his letter to the Christians in Rome. Grace, salvation, and faith.....this the big idea, the theme of Romans, and Paul will spend the 16 chapters of Romans exploring what it means. Grace, salvation and faith.....this is the very center of the Christian faith. In Romans we have seen that it has meant God in grace has acted to overcome sin in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are saved by what God has already done in Christ. And by faith we demonstrate our trust in God that salvation has really happened; we are restored to a relationship with God. Grace, salvation and faith.....that’s what Romans is about.

In our text this morning Paul continues his exploration of grace, salvation and faith.

II. Text

Read Romans 6:1-14.

III. Brief Exegesis

Sometimes strange things happen.....strange but true.

Last weekend on a trip to the Hudson Valley Jeanne and I stopped at the Container Store in White Plains, NY. Jeanne had some returns to make from a job, and White Plains was “sort of” on the way. The return was somewhat complicated, so the young woman who was at the cashier asked the floor manager to come over and help. At a point near the end of the return the cashier asked for Jeanne’s driver’s license. Somewhat shocked the cashier said to Jeanne, “You were born on December 27th? So was I.....and so is the floor manager here.” They were surprised. Jeanne said, “Well it gets even stranger. My husband was also born on December 27th.” So there we were.....standing at a cash register at the Container Store in White Plains, NY.....four people at the same place at the same time.....who by some odd circumstances discovered they had the same birthday. Strange but true.

Strange but true things happen around us. You may have heard about the family lost in a Massachusetts corn maze that called 911 to get rescued. And from the world of professional football the Detroit Lions (a long time loser) is 5 wins and 0 losses (one of only two undefeated teams). Strange, but true.....

As Paul explores the nature of grace, salvation and faith in our text from Romans 6, he discusses baptism in a way that may sound strange to us. And what I would like do to is invite you to ponder the “strange, but true” nature of the theology Paul shares.

Paul knows that as he preaches grace, salvation and faith.....when he preaches that we have been saved by God’s grace in Jesus Christ which we receive by faith.....that salvation is not about what I do, but what God has done.....that some will say, “Then why not keep on sinning? If we’re saved by grace, then why change at all? If God has already done it, why not keep on choosing sin, because God’s grace covers it all?” These are good questions, and in Paul’s preaching over the years he has heard these questions. In our text we get a well-thought response by Paul, one that he has probably given over the years in a number of places.

In this discussion, that may sound strange to us, Paul’s points are these:

1-In this created order all people have been subject to the power of sin. It is a force that corrupts what we do and don’t do....what we say and don’t say.....what we think and don’t understand;

2-Only in death does anyone become free from the power of sin;

3-In Christian baptism we have a type of union with Christ;

4-Because of this union with Christ in baptism, we share in Christ’s death and resurrection;

5-That means that as Christ died, we share in his death, and are thus free from the power of sin;

6-And it means that as Christ was raised, we are raised to new life now, and have the promise of resurrection in the new age to come.

This is the summary of Paul’s theology here. And in it he’s drawing on the very early Christian theology of baptism. The movement of adult, immersion baptism is helpful, visual theology for understanding this text in Romans 6. A person first stands in a baptismal pool, confessing his or her faith in Christ. The person then leans back into the water, united with Christ in his death, and freed from the power of sin. The person then comes up out of the water to new life, and the promise of resurrection. This newly baptized person can now choose not to sin, and live into this radical, new life as a follower of Jesus Christ. Sin has lost its power. This is what Paul has in mind.

Now sure, we still sin. That is why we have a confession of sin in worship every Sunday. But Paul's point is that we are **no longer under the power of sin**. We can **choose**. Often this choice to not sin may make us different than the world around us (and that's what can make it hard). But we **can** choose. Or as Paul says in the text:

"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."
(Rm. 6:4)

We can choose.....we can choose new life.

Not long ago Jeanne and I saw a piece of the Berlin Wall. It was at Kentuck Nob, a Frank Lloyd Wright house near Ohio State Park. As I looked at this 12 foot high piece of wall covered in graffiti, I knew it was about more than concrete. It was about ways of life, beliefs and oppression. From 1961 until the wall came down in 1989 it separated people from East and West Germany. To live in East Germany was to live in a police state, dominated and controlled by informants and Stasi (the secret police). It was a limited, controlled and fearful life. However, when the Berlin Wall came down the separation, domination and fear ended. People in the former East Germany were free. New life was before them. Now some East Germans did choose to continue to live as they had with the wall up. But that was because it was the life they knew, and they were afraid of change. But many former East Germans chose to live a different way. They were free.

That's Paul's point here. By baptism we are united with Christ, and we are freed from the power of sin. The wall has come down. We can choose to live a different way. We are free. Why live an old way? Why not "walk in newness of life."

Grace, salvation and faith.....so if we're really saved by God's grace received by faith.....if salvation really depends on what God has done and not what we do....why don't we continue in sin? Paul's answer is simple and powerful; because we are no longer under the power of sin, and we **can** now choose to live new lives to the glory and joy of God. The wall is down. Why live the old way? That's the strange truth of the gospel.

And that's the same strange truth in the stories from Matthew 9. Jesus forgives a man, and then heals him. But it's also more. It's a metaphor or an illustration of the power of the gospel in Jesus, which frees a man from the paralysis and dominion of sin, to the freedom of "walking in newness of life" (to use Paul's own words, Rm. 6:4), which he literally does when he stands up and walks home to new life. And it's the same thing that frees Matthew the tax collector to become a follower of Jesus Christ. And it's the same gospel that can free the tax collectors and sinners who eat with Jesus to become

people who follow Jesus, and live new lives with God. Strange, but true.....freed from the power of sin to live new lives. Freed from an addiction.....freed from past hurts.....freed from guilt.....freed from darkness.....who's not interested in that?

IV. Reflections

As I was thinking about this text and Paul's wonderful theology of grace I imagined a great musical. I imagined we're all at this great musical. Let's call it "grace, salvation and faith." And in the first act we've seen, heard and experienced the power of sin, and our freedom from sin through our union with Christ in baptism. There a cross on the stage, and the waters of baptism. It's a powerful first act....an act of freedom and liberation. The wall has come down. We believe. And we are now free.....free to live new ways for God.

As the house lights come on we read the program about the second act to come. In it there will be a new creation, resurrection, and eternity in the beauty and glory of God. In it we will experience, see and hear great joy, as our union with Christ in our baptism means that we will share in a resurrection like his resurrection. It will be a powerful finale. It is sure to come. It's hard to wait.

But right **now** it's intermission. We have experienced the first act of freedom from the power of sin. And we now are awaiting the second act of resurrection and new creation. But right now it is in **this intermission**. So how do we live? This is why grace, salvation and faith are about so much more than a "reserved parking place in heaven." That's great....it's the second act of this great musical.....but salvation is more. It is also about the first act of the musical; freed from the power of sin.....and living new lives during this intermission.

I believe that living during this intermission means many things; forgiveness, generosity, love, compassion, peace, laughter, joy and patience....like Jesus. But this week I was specifically thinking about how living in this intermission literally means different values and a different way of life than so much of what we see around us. The Occupy Wall Street protesters may have it right as they protest injustice and greed. But those who live in this intermission of this great musical would also question the deeper values of our consumer driven and materialistic culture. They would believe and live a different way.

This past week my daughter Katanya shared an interesting experience. She shared how she had simplified her life, and had tried to take a step out of the consumer driven culture. She then shared how when she browsed through a fashion magazine, Vogue, and all its advertizing, and being a very visual person.....she had a strong urge to go shopping.....to step back into the addictive world of consumerism. Katanya said she was surprised by the strong pull she felt.

Reflecting on her experience, Christian faith, and the materialism all around us, Katanya then sent me a quote from a book, Staying Alive, by Roger Walsh, that she found helpful. The quote was this:

“Growing numbers of people are moving in the direction of voluntary simplicity. This is not deprivation or sacrifice. It does not necessarily mean living alone in an unheated cabin (like Henry David Thoreau in On Walden’s Pond). Rather, it is an avoidance of external clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purposes of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions.”

Voluntary simplicity.....reducing external clutter.....reordering our energy and desires.....saying “no” and simplifying our calendars.....so that we live into the greater fullness of life with God. I believe that is living in this intermission of the great musical of God’s grace. It is strange in this world, but true. It is the gospel.

Soren Kierkegaard, 19th C Christian, existential philosopher told this story:

“There was once a duck town and a duck church. On Sunday many of the ducks went to church. One Sunday the duck pastor got up and preached: ‘Ducks, we don’t need to waddle. Ducks, we have wings. Ducks, with wings we can soar like eagles!!’ The ducks all quacked, ‘Amen,’ felt good, and waddled home.”

Friends, we don’t live under the power of sin. Friends, we can choose to live a different way....you can live a different way. Friends, we can live new lives...stand up and live into newness of life. It is the gospel. Amen.