

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
June 22, 2008
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Romans 6:1-11

The Tomb and Womb of Baptism

I wonder if the apostle Paul ever got “tuckered out,” as my grandmother used to say. Paul was always in the thick of ministry. He was in and out of prison because of his proclamation. He was constantly on the road, going from one church to another church, preaching and teaching and trying to build them up. He started new churches everywhere he could and tried to find them solid pastoral leadership. He was always trying to raise money for all the ministries God was calling him to start. And, probably the most draining of all, Paul was always stuck smack dab in the middle of church fights. Not even 70 kids at a week-long Vacation Bible School can suck dry a preacher’s energy reserve like church infighting can. *Not that I know anything about that...*

And Paul was stuck in the middle of all of them. First, Paul had to deal with the church in Galatia. They were arguing round and round about circumcision. Their main questions centered on if you had to be circumcised in order to be a follower of Jesus or not. How did the requirement of God’s law look through the lens of Christ?

But the Galatians were not the only ones stirring up trouble. Paul also had to write a letter to the church in Corinth. The rich and powerful Corinthians were eating all the food and drinking all the wine at the Lord’s Supper before the poorer members had even gotten off work and been able to get to the church house. The walled-up social divisions that existed outside the sanctuary had taken strong hold in that small congregation. And Paul was determined to help them dismantle those walled-up divisions, brick by brick.

Then, to top it all off, as I mentioned earlier, Paul was in a stewardship campaign for the budget of the Jerusalem church. He was hoping that the symbol of a joint offering from many different congregations would be enough to reconcile the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in the church. “If only everyone could see themselves as ONE body in Christ,” Paul might have hoped out loud.

And so, with Galatia and Corinth simmering in the background, Paul decided he needed to write a letter to the church in Rome before he went to visit them. He was going to stop in Rome after he went to Jerusalem, as he made his way to Spain. Perhaps Paul wanted to exhort them in the faith, build them up, and introduce himself a little. Paul had not been to this particular congregation before, but he had heard how they were doing. It seemed that things were going pretty well. But Paul knew they faced some challenges.

Like the kids at our VBS and like the church in Galatia, the church in Rome was pretty ethnically and culturally mixed. Lots of people from different places with different experiences and probably different understandings of what it meant to claim Jesus as Messiah. And, like the church in Galatia, Paul knew that this church in Rome was also made up of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

With all of that diversity, Paul might have decided it was just a matter of time before a power struggle erupted. He had seen it before in churches, especially if there was a vacuum of leadership. One small group of people would decide that they had THE answer and everyone else just needed to follow their wisdom. So, with the conflicts of Galatia and Corinth still simmering in his mind, Paul chose to write the Romans a letter in which he would confront, head-on, some potential areas of theological disagreement. Perhaps he could help them focus on their unity in Christ, given by God’s lavish grace, and their response to live a radically new life beginning with their baptism.

Today's selection from chapter 6 lands right in the middle of Paul's letter. And, since Paul did write rather systematically, building his argument point by point, let me back up a chapter and fill you in on the first part of the conversation. In Chapter 5, Paul spends a great deal of time on sin and grace. The free gift of God's grace, Paul argues, is stronger than any bondage to sin. There is more mercy in God than can ever be sin in us. Jesus Christ, Paul claims, is the new Adam, in whom all slavery to sin and death is put to death. As our own Rev. Ryan Baer is preaching this week to his congregation in Florida, "There is nothing that we can do, no sin that we commit, no commandment that we break, that is not overcome by the love and grace of God given to us in Jesus Christ."¹

But then, just as that part of his letter closes, it is as if Paul senses a possible reaction from the church people. For in chapter 6 he immediately tries to put to rest any notion that this enormous grace was "cheap" and did not ask anything from us in response. In other words, Paul seems to get concerned that the folks in Rome might decide that if sinning brings about God's grace, then perhaps they should reside in sin even more to get even more grace. "What then are we to say?" Paul writes. "Should we continue residing in sin in order that grace may abound? Absolutely not! That is ridiculous! By no means!"

"For how can we who have died to sin go on living in it? Don't you all remember and 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, we too might walk in newness of life...we know that our old self was crucified with Jesus so that the body of sin might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin."

I need to pause for a moment, because Paul and the Romans lived in a very different time than we do. For Paul and the Roman church, there was no concept of self-autonomy, self-rule. You were always ruled by something or someone. Either you resided in the reign of Cesar or you resided in the reign of God. Either you resided in the reign of sin subject to its power, or you resided in the reign of grace subject to God's power. There was no gray area for Paul or for the Romans. There was no "spiritual but not religious;" no "I play by my own rules." Our Enlightenment world view would make no sense to Paul.

So, Paul understood that you either lived in the reign of sin ('the flesh' as Paul would say) or you lived in the reign of God ('the spirit'). He also knew that the churches in Galatia and Corinth were continuing to struggle with what it meant to be one in Christ, a new creation. Therefore, Paul seemingly wants to be perfectly clear with this new church in Rome.

He pounds the pulpit with his words proclaiming "Look—in your baptism you renounced the jurisdiction and rule of sin over your life. You died to that. The tomb of your baptism became the womb of your new life. You have been reborn into the reign and rule of grace and freedom and salvation. **SO LIVE LIKE IT!**" Don't you get the sense that Paul was an effective revival preacher?

And, probably due to all the church infighting he had already lived through, Paul decides that these Christians in Rome need to hear where the rubber of their faith hits the road. They need to hear how their baptismal identities directly impact the way they were now called to live. "In your baptism," Paul preaches, "you have already died. And in your baptism, you have already been reborn. Death no longer has dominion over you. Fear no longer has hold on you. Jesus died once and for all so that you all must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." It is powerful preaching, isn't it. We need not fear death, for in our baptism we have already died. Paul is a powerful preacher.

But, my guess is that while this strong and vibrant imagery of baptism as death was familiar to the Romans, it is probably not that familiar to us. It is not the baptismal imagery I often use or preach. I focus on new life, or cleansing, or the reality of baptism as God's announcement of God's claiming and sealing. And all of those

meanings are biblical and true, too. But so is this image of baptism as death and rebirth. But I know that I have never held a baby down by this font and spoke of her baptism as her death to sin, her death to all that would attempt to separate her from God and others, as her death to all the powers and principalities that would try to take hold of her life. I have not spoken much of baptism as a kind of death. It would be jarring, wouldn't it.

John Westerhoff, in his book *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*, writes about a jarring baptism he witnessed in a small church in a Latin American village. The congregation had gathered; they had recalled God's gracious acts, just as Paul did in chapter 5. And now it was time for them to respond to God's Living Word with a baptism. But where we might play Jesus Loves Me, at this small church the congregation began the mournful sounds of a funeral hymn.

A solemn procession moved down the center aisle. A father carried a child's coffin he had made from wood, a mother carried a bucket of water from the family well, and a priest carried their sleeping infant wrapped only in a native blanket. As they all reached the chancel, the father placed the coffin on the altar, the mother poured the water in the coffin, and the priest covered the wakening baby's skin with the embalming oil. The singing softened to a whisper. The priest slowly lowered the infant into the coffin and immersed the child's head in the water. As he did so, he exclaimed, "I kill you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. " "Amen," everyone shouted. Then quickly lifting the child into the air for all to see, the priest then declared, "And I resurrect you that you might love and serve the Lord." And with those words of rebirth and resurrection, the congregation immediately broke into a joyous Easter hymnⁱⁱ.

Perhaps Paul should have tried to embody his letter in that way. For I bet the Romans would have gotten the point, don't you. I know I won't forget it. The image of this baby going down and coming up is a jarring, but incredibly powerful image, isn't it. And you have to wonder if, in that small congregation, they have as many theological identity struggles as the Romans or the Galatians, or as we Presbyterians can sometimes have, or not. Maybe the fact that they regularly remember their death to sin and their rebirth in grace affects their life together. Maybe the fact that every baptism becomes an Easter moment keeps them grounded in what it means to be fully alive to God in Christ Jesus. Maybe their constant rehearsal of letting go into God makes the occasional church fight look mundane in comparison and helps them keep their focus on living as One Body in Christ Jesus. Perhaps.

But, more than likely, that little church, just like the church in Galatia, just like the church in Corinth, just like the church in Rome, just like our own denomination meeting at the General Assembly this week in California, that little church still argues with each other about what it means to be faithful and who gets to decide what. BUT, at least with every baptism, their eyes are lifted and they see the bigger picture – God's bigger picture—that they have already died to all that separated them from God and from one another; and now, they are completely free to live as one beloved body in Christ Jesus their Lord. Not because of how good they are; but because of how good God is in Jesus Christ.

I bet that kind of big picture vision is what Paul hoped the Romans, the Galatians, and the Corinthians would grasp too. That is probably why he spent so much time preaching and writing about bold grace, baptismal life, and unity in Christ. So that they, and we, would never forget under Whose reign we live, now and forever more. So that they, and we, would never forget the delicious freedom we have been given to be fully alive. For in Jesus Christ, death has lost its sting. And in Jesus Christ, God's grace and mercy have been unleashed to create holy havoc in our world. Amen! Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Preached on June 22, 2008 in "Drowning in the Waters of Baptism," by Rev. Ryan Baer at Lakeside Presbyterian Church in West Palm Beach, Florida.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in an article by Rev. William Fogleman in "Romans 6:3-14, Between Text and Sermon," in *Interpretation*, 1993. Page 295.