

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

July 12, 2020

Psalm 65:1–8

1 Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion,
and to you shall vows be performed.

2 O you who hear prayer,
to you shall all flesh come.

3 When iniquities prevail against me,
you atone for our transgressions.

4 Blessed is the one you choose and bring near,
to dwell in your courts!

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
the holiness of your temple!

5 By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness,
O God of our salvation,
the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas;

6 the one who by his strength established the mountains,
being girded with might;

7 who stills the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples,

8 so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs.
You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy.

Old Testament Scripture Reading: Isaiah 55:10–13

10 “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

12 “For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the Lord,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

EPISTLE: Romans 8:12–17

Heirs with Christ

12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

HOLY GOSPEL: Matthew 13:1–9

The Parable of the Sower

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, 6 but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear.”

Sermon 27 – Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

“Confess A Good Fight”

Romans 8:12-17

Dear friends,

As Christians, we are supposed to be and act a certain way, this is difficult to argue with.

There are large swathes of the Scriptures dedicated to just that. The purpose of those passages, though, is nuanced and thus worth visiting on occasion. Telling people to be good does not make them good, God Himself knows this because He has tremendous experience with it, anyone who

has dealt with people of any description knows it too. So what does it do? And more to the point, why do the Scriptures insist on doing it so often?

This fits right into Paul's step-by-step treatment of the Christian faith. That's what Romans is, after all, unfolding all Christian beliefs, like unwrapping a present, or putting together a piece of furniture. Paul has talked about sin, and the overwhelming consequences of it – chiefly death – and he has talked about sin's persistence, the gene-deep root that it has in us, how it is expressed in every possible way that human beings talk and act. He has talked about Christ's across-the-board atonement for our sins, how that too bleeds into everything we do and are. He talks about how, when Christ saves us, it is as good as being completely remade from the genetic material up, from the soul outward. He has talked about the inherent tensions involved with having both of things be true at the same time, the uneasy Cold War between sinner and saint that is constantly going on inside us. Now, finally, Paul will talk about what being a Christian means for our behavior and our identity. So that's Romans so far.

“12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.”

So far, so good. We are debtors, we owe someone something, but who? Not the flesh, Paul says, which means not you, not your life, and not anything that has to do with it. So we don't live according to what we want in this day and age, we live another way, and this is hardly news to us Christians. Paul goes on. **“13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”** That makes things slightly clearer. Paul goes into the consequences of the thing. If you spend your life following your own wants, trying to meet your own needs and absolutely nothing else, not only will you probably be considered a colossal jerk, you're going to die at the

end of it. We die nonetheless, but not all death is created equal. For the sinner, death is the hopeless end of the hopeless grind that is life. For the Christian, death is the transition from a state of tension and uneasiness to a true, hope-filled, glorious life with Christ. Christians don't greet death as a friend, but they do look at death as the fulfillment of Christ's work in us. Death isn't a good thing, but Christ's work through death is a good thing indeed, the most blessed of gifts.

Paul goes fairly standard after that part though. He encourages us to be led by Spirit to live as Sons of God. But again, telling people to be good doesn't make it happen. Everyone here knows what being good means. But we aren't. We still mumble things under our breath, fight with our families and friends, gossip and so forth. We are still given to despair and frustration and all the other sins of the heart. So why does Paul say this? Is he encouraging us? Is he lecturing us because we have all been naughty boys and girls?

Paul tells us, and spends much of the rest of the reading doing so. Firstly, Paul tells us that by the Spirit, the deeds of the body are put to death. How does that happen? Repentance. That is what he's talking about. He is talking about the Christian practice of daily approaching God, admitting we are a sinner, confessing some of the worst of those sins with our mouth, and squaring our Christian shoulders to give it a better showing next time. That is how sin is put to death, that is how sin is fought by each and every one of you. We fight it by confessing it, admitting it, and then trying to do better. Logic tells us that the trying to do better is the important part. Paul is telling us that the admitting it, the repentance, is what actually strikes back against the devil's temptations of us. That is where the battle is fought, with the mouth. The devil knows you and your weak spots way too well for you to be able to win against him in your heart or in your

head. No, you win with your mouth, by admitting your sin to God, by telling Him you can't fight the devil. That's what Paul discusses next.

15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" God does not save us just to leave us alone. God does not save us to send us against the wolves armed with nothing. God does not save us to then levy the incredible burden on us that we have to somehow Christian well enough on our own. I've always loathed that twisted distortion of Christianity, because I heard it constantly when I was young. God saves you, now its up to you! What nonsense! That would be like taking a soldier through boot camp, training him, then sending him to fight an enemy with no rifle, no army, no tanks, no bullets, and no medical supplies. Our God is not like that, and Paul reminds us this. He is our Father! He equips us to fight, He gives us the supplies we need to live our Christian life. But how He does this doesn't fit with our definitions, and certainly defies the popular Christian notions of "fighting sin." That's what makes it so confusing. Paul says we aren't slaves to sin anymore, and furthermore we aren't slaves to God's law anymore, so we aren't enslaved to God either. We are sons, not slaves, a legal term of art from Paul's time. That means we're part of the family, we're made men, you and I, and we don't have to be the fall guy or take the dangerous bank jobs anymore.

Paul says our fight is precisely by this crying to God for help. That is how we fight, by admitting our helplessness, which explains why Paul has said all this. God is not telling you how to be good in the hopes that you will be. God is not beating you over the head thinking that will get you to be better people. What God is doing is giving you directions. He's giving you instructions for what your fight might look like. You have this Spirit of God that He talks about.

You are God's children. Now that you are, here's what you can do. Not what you must do to be saved, but here's what you can do. Here's what you're capable of. He'll spend the next chapters spelling out exactly what those things you can do are.

So back to the question at the beginning. If God knows we are sinners, if God has made us sons, why does He always tell us what to do? To spur us, for one. God doesn't want us to give up trying to do better, and we're all too apt to settle because that's difficult to keep doing, particularly when the Scripture makes it so nauseatingly clear that God is the one who is really doing it. That's been starting to get on my nerves lately, personally, God is starting to seem like a plagiarist, taking credit for *my* hard work without actually doing anything Himself. But that's just the ego, and I got a fair size one of them. God knows how easy it is for just coast without really challenging ourselves, and He doesn't want that, so He introduces awful things to stir the pot, make it uncomfortable. Secondly, the Scriptures give us these rules for guidance, for specificity as to how we might love our neighbor and so forth. We need direction because it isn't clear to us, even with Ten Commandments Jesus still had to preach the Sermon on the Mount. Finally, the last part of what Paul says:

“16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” Our spirits are mutually testifying that we are children of God and inheritors of God's promise. Great. So what is all this doing? It's reminding you, my dear Christian friends, that you are still alive. That you are still God's children. That you are heirs with Christ, that you will inherit that promise, that you have a place in God's machine. You are here to serve. But I don't serve, you might cry, I'm too old, I'm too weak, I'm too sick, I'm

too stuck. Indeed, but none of that changes what God says. You are His son, inheritor of His promise, beneficiary of it, and spreader of it. God tells you that you are alive to remind you that you are, that all this isn't just some kind of really badly edited and ill-conceived nightmare, which is how it often seems. Being Christian doesn't change the plague, the civil war, the ignorance, the arrogance, or any of that garbage. Being Christian instead changes you, makes you hate the injustice, impatient with your own sin, have a stomach full of the world's stupidity and short-sighted greed. In short, dear Christian friends, it makes you long for Christ, it makes you long for His promise. You can't change the world, but Christ has changed you, and He gives you these words to remind you of that. We are all indeed Stranded now, stuck, but our destiny is the kingdom of heaven, and that means we won't be stuck forever.

Amen.