

Proper 7A; 4th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.25.23

Romans 6:1-11

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore 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. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We 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. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 10:24-39

“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (548)

Jesus is saying here that his coming into the world won’t bring peace, it will bring division. According to Matthew, in this commissioning discourse, wherein Jesus is remembered to have gathered disciples and now means to send them out as apostles, Jesus claims that his coming won’t result in a pacification of conflict or a world-wide unity of purpose among all people but a furtherance of conflict, a confusion of purpose.

Not what we want to hear. On this lovely June morning, when we’ve finally arrived in summer, this isn’t likely what we’d expect to hear, especially not from Jesus. I mean, isn’t he the prince of peace?

But, if it's the case that this jars you, that this doesn't comport; if this doesn't comport with your experience of Jesus or your expectation of Jesus, consider the possibility that your relationships in life don't ask you compromise on the truth. And that's a good thing. You're a lucky person, just as I am a lucky person, if your primary relationships don't demand that you compromise on the truth—the truth of yourself, the truth of your convictions about life and your purpose in it.

Really, if you regard conflict with others as a sign of trouble rather than as the price you pay for your own freedom, then your freedom has come without high cost—and that's a good thing for you. You should rejoice and give thanks.

Because that's not true for a lot of people. No, a lot of people are brought up in cultures where conformity to propriety is a higher value than living in the truth about yourself as God-given, God-created and God-formed. A lot of people are raised to “behave themselves” more than to stand in the truth. And still more aren't given the tools much to tell the difference, between living in obedience to the dominant way and living in tune with the truth, the gospel truth. No, not everyone's relationships and situation in life allow them full freedom to grow up as they've been created to be, full and free in the Lord.

I recently watched the HBO docuseries called *Shiny, Happy People*. It's about the Duggar family, famous for having nineteen children and also for having a reality tv show called *19 Kids and Counting*. Beginning in 2008, it was on The Learning Channel, on basic cable, for seven years before being canceled in 2015, though then a spin-off show took up the slack. For what it's worth, it all amounted to one more cultural phenomenon about which I confused my lack of interest with a society-wide lack of interested.

Turns out, people were interest.

In fact, it had powerful influence, especially among the “Christian” homeschool movement, which seems to have grown under the show's influence, and the Christian Nationalist movement for which the show provides front and cover. The smiling though never-questioned authority of the father, the high voice and upward gaze of the mother, and the placidly-behaved children, always lined up and dressed alike, all do indeed provide a shiny, happy cover to the many-tentacled organization behind it all.

The Institute of Basic Life Principles purports to teach people how to live faithful to Christ, though it is actually authoritarian in aim, plays out as a cult of personality with multi-level-marketing techniques, and even has ties with militia groups. One of their ideas finds shorthand in

“Quiverfull,” a reference to two verses of one psalm that claims, “As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man, so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them....” In this framing, children are arrows in a father’s quiver, making it so the more children a man has the mightier a warrior he amounts to being. With many children, Christian Nationalists understand that they will soon exercise political power on a society-wide scale.

The thing is authoritarianism doesn’t last. It can’t. Unless you can manage what North Korea has managed, an isolated landmass controlled by a ruthless family whose reign predates the internet, authoritarianism will fail because it’s untrue. It just doesn’t square with the way people are, the way creation is—utterly, terribly dynamic.

And so, as the children of this movement grow into adulthood, many, many of them are going through what’s called deconstruction, the taking apart of the hard, scary world they’ve been presented, which would have them in a defensive posture throughout the living of their days, women hiding behind their men, men hiding behind their guns which they seem to think is how apostles of Christ are to go out into the world. They deconstruct, a painful process, though on the other side of which is this other world, a world that also has its frights but that has way more good guys and more filled with good works than the one they’d previously assumed.

It’s just us. It’s just all of us. We’re a mess. But God loves and God’s grace abounds, showing up in the most surprising places.

An expert in child development interviewed for docuseries said the one thing that stayed with me most from the three hours of viewing. Witnessing these 19 children all lined up, obediently playing their violins or doing their Bible-based personal growth lessons, she said they don’t bear signs of flourishing children, they bear the signs of the broken and scared.

I knew a woman who, in her early 80s, moved from the small Scottish village where she’d spent her life to America, Massachusetts, the Berkshires near where her daughter had at long last settled.

A Scotch Presbyterian, she brought her Bible with her everywhere she went.

I fell into conversation with her once. I asked her how she was finding America, this big jangling mess of a country. “It’s quite unwieldy,” was the gist of her response. Trying to muster some good-humored grace, she grounded herself in her strict but joyful faith, saying before she could stop herself from saying, “You’d have to be God to tolerate it all.”

Indeed. So, it’s funny how the most self-assertively godly among us seem so allergic to actual freedom, freedom of the sort Christ himself opens the way for.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is persistently concerned with how people gather, by what spirit people gather, what spirit binds people together. That binding: the gospel of Jesus Christ is persistently ambivalent about what binds us, aware of the tragic fact that gathering people can be done by any manner of spirit, spirits of threat and menace, spirits of coercion or manipulation, or a more holy spirit of appeal, of love freely offered to be freely received—or not. (And if not, just brush the dust of that place off your shoes and move on.)

This is why the coming of Christ into the world won't bring peace before it brings conflict, won't bring pacification before it brings division—because Jesus manifestly refuses to gather people by means of fear or force. For this, the message the apostles are sent to bring runs contra to the way that social unification has been established since time immemorial. The way history has, since the beginning, established social order is through means that, though they may be good enough for now, aren't good in any ultimate way, and in many, many cases aren't good at all except for the select few who exercise all the power and lay claim to all its fruits.

It's not for nothing that the so-called Unification Church, that of Sun Young Moon, is an authoritarian cult. That's how unification is established: through authoritarianism. And once that authority begins to crumble...

One of the reasons China supports North Korea is because of the understanding that, if the regime in North Korea were to fail and suddenly all of those people were no longer held by its terrible force, there would be an unleashing of a humanitarian crisis on a scale that even all of Eastern Asia couldn't manage. The desperation, the hunger, the ignorance, the poor health, that most of the population of that hermit state suffer would have them suffer still more were they suddenly “free” before the benefit of no longer being repressed were to find new dawn.

Loosing the bonds of injustice, as the gospel of Jesus Christ is to effect in the world, leaves a power vacuum that can make matters worse before it makes everything better, and long before it makes everything good in any ultimate sense.

We are in ordinary time. We are in the mean-time. So, you loose the bonds of injustice at your own risk. You make to totter the power structure of society at your own peril. Jesus knew this, and now he prepared his apostles also to know this—for the student is not greater than the teacher and the servant is not greater than the master, so whatever the teacher suffers, the student can also expect to suffer, and whatever the master suffers, the servant can also expect to suffer. Jesus would suffer for letting loose the bonds that bound the people, for setting the terms of engagement on self-giving love and mutual concern rather than ritual tribute, coercive obligation, and the menace

of might-makes-right. He would suffer for this radical reset, and the apostles should expect to suffer as well—those apostles back then and us apostles right now.

Though this is less likely the case for us. Fact is, we live in a society that tends more toward the libertarian than the authoritarian. Our society is more comfortable with an ethic of “Live and let live,” than with a majoritarian idea that falling in line is the best way.

That said, as we all know, there’s a significant enough minority with authoritarian sympathies as to make me for one quite nervous. More troubling still, many who seem eager to line up behind a strong man consider themselves Christians, which is a circle I cannot square. Christianity is a stubbornly anti-authoritarian faith, for ours is a savior who was crucified by the powers and authorities, and ours is a spirit who operates very much outside established lines of authority.

You know, Christians in their earliest days were thought anarchists, were thought a people without a law. They could do *anything* and regard it as righteous. Some people did, it seems, do anything, and rest assured that this was somehow righteous.

Which was what Paul was writing in response to. In his letter to the Romans, he was addressing the problem that, since Jesus defeated sin and death in his having died and being raised, indeed since death no longer held its terrible authority, then the law that functioned to hold death at bay was no longer necessary, if at least in its mystical, spiritual sense. God’s grace abounds, so the law practiced to secure grace is revealed as irrelevant, redundant. And since God’s grace abounds in spite of sin, does that mean the more sin there is the more of God’s grace there then will be?

Well, “By no means!” writes Paul. Just because God’s grace can reach into the places of most reckless living and even darkest death-dealing, that doesn’t mean we should sin all the more; that doesn’t mean we should live recklessly and deal in death, which though has its seductive appeal. It can fun to control others with the power of threat. It can be titillating to see what others will do when you have the power to hurt them. That has its thrills.

But what it means (that Christ has died and Christ is risen and that we might now live in Christ) is that we also are to have died to death, which would have us no longer interested in its power, no longer captive to its glamour or its capacity to endow those who deal in death with the capacity also to control others, to control whole politics and economies. No, now the greatest joy is to live cruciform, following Jesus into self-giving even at the cost of our lives (should it come to that), so to live with him in new and deathless life, which rejoices not only in our own wellbeing

but in the wellbeing of others—friends, neighbors, strangers alike, all people, all creatures, all creation.

And if it doesn't cost our lives, it could cost what of life we know, what of life we've been given and then expected to live into. We might have to deconstruct the world we've been given, which would have us then let loose into the world as God forms and informs it and informs us. Which might make it so your relationships break down. The truth of God unleashed in the world through Christ might make it so you no longer fit in the forms you've been given, you've been perhaps even forced into.

I'm sorry about that. If that's the case, I'm sorry about that. If living the gospel truth of yourself has divided you from your household, you parents or parents-in-law, or your children or other loved ones, I'm sorry about that.

But that's what the church is for. This is to be a place where you fit. This is to be a people among whom you are free to be as God has made you to be. It's not for nothing some of our sanctuaries are so big: they're made to fit whatever of love and truth comes here for expression, for further growth.

Well, it's June, as I said. It's one the loveliest months in the Berkshires, and it's about to burst forth with summer. Tanglewood hosted its first events on the season and the BSO is about to take the stage. There is much of this world that beckons our attention, our appreciation.

Imagine being raised to fear all this bounty.

Imagine being raised to think the only safe way through is to reject everything that hasn't been approved of by the man in charge.

The terrible truth of the God in whose name we gather, in whose spirit we gather and are set loose, and is revealed to us in the terrible freedom of his son who lives irrespective of having died: the terrible truth is this, that this whole world is beloved and abounds with God's grace, and yet there is also sin and the seductive power of fear and death, and then there's us, who know enough to know this but don't know so much as to tell the two apart, to say nothing of being able to tease the two apart—grace and sin.

So, I'd send you (if that's what you're looking for from me) as Jesus sends all of us out into a world that is plump with promise, is confounded by sin, and that will welcome the arrival of love and good news, or will welcome such things often enough. So be that. Be that in the world.

Thanks be to God.

