

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
June 21, 2020
Romans 6:1b-11 ~ Matthew 10:24-39
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One of the gifts, or limitations, of Zoom worship is that we can't really hear each other. According to liturgical custom and practice, when the deacon concludes the reading of the gospel and says: "The gospel of the Lord", you all say: "Praise to you, O Christ." Did you really say that just now? If so, did you just say it out of habit? Are you actually praising Jesus for saying such hard things to his followers? Feel free to type what you really wanted to say – maybe really did say – in the chat bar.

It's okay – really. This is what is known as a hard or tough gospel. Here's a little secret from test study tables: pastors push back on this stuff, too. At least one pastor in the Zoom text study meeting I'm part of likened this passage from Matthew to a smorgasbord: a whole variety of things from which one might pick out the most appealing and skip the rest. If only we could ... Maybe if only we knew better how to take it all in. So, let's first put on our Lutheran reading lenses with the Small Catechism on the subject of baptism, especially the fourth question, and our reading from Romans 6 today.

Luther, as you may recall, wrote the Small Catechism for use in the home to teach children the Christian faith. Many of us had to memorize it in the classes that prepared us for confirmation. Although rote memorization may have fallen out of vogue, intensive study of the catechism is still a part of preparing for making affirmation of baptism. Luther goes over important things to know, explaining what these mean: commandment by commandment through the ten, article by article through the Apostles' Creed petition by petition through the Lord's Prayer, ... and then he comes to the sacraments. For these, he applies four basic questions: What is the sacrament? What is the promise? How does the ordinary do the extraordinary? And then the practical question. For communion, which is received at some frequency, the question is about how to be prepared and worthy. For baptism, which is received only once, the practical question is: What is the significance, what does baptism mean for daily living?

If you've forgotten, the answer is that Baptism signifies the old person in us with all its sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. And where did Luther get these ideas from? What Paul wrote in the sixth chapter of his Letter to the Romans, which we also read today.

Paul is continuing on with his theme from last week's reading – that God by sheer grace and not because of anything we do to earn or deserve it, sets us free from sin and death through trust in

Jesus Christ. So now that you don't have to do anything, what do you do? One possibility, that isn't really all that absurd, is to sin even more because the more sin to forgive, the more grace you get, right? "That is so not a thing!", Paul counters. You died in baptism – that old life you had since the very beginning was crucified alongside Christ and died; baptism was your burial in that death with Christ. Now, just as Christ was raised from dead, so are you – it's Christ's own life resurrected in you. You can't go on sinning if you're dead to it because now you are living to God in Christ Jesus.

Paul's language in this is anything but metaphorical. The words he uses are at the root of terms in our own modern English language that you can find in any science or medical textbook: words like *soma*, *body*, as in *somatic* ... *nekros*, *dead* or *decaying* or *rotting* as in *necrosis* or *necrotic* ... *zoe*, *life*, which became the female name *Zoe* but also is the root of *zoology*, the study of animal life and yes, *zoo*. And for you Marvel Comics Avengers fans, the big baddie Thanos is in here, too, from *thanatos*, which means *death*.

And Paul says that if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Christ in a resurrection like is ... which means the description of the resurrection must be as concrete and tangible as the other words Paul has used. It means a description something like what John Updike set forth in his poem "Seven Stanzas at Easter":

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse,
the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that-pierced-died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the

faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

Death that real, resurrection that real and powerful – that's what you get in baptism. Christ's life is now entwined with yours, not joined like partners or a yoke of oxen, not Jesus is my co-pilot or even my pilot. Paul writes of interweaving, mingling so it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. That's what baptism does. It's how Christ's resurrection happens in your being in the here and now, how you become child of God – just like Jesus, how you are reoriented to the ways of God's Reign and Realm and set to the on-going work of Christ: bringing that way of life as God would have into being in this world right now.

Now that we've got our reading lenses cleaned up and in place, let's look again at that gospel reading ...

If you are now joined to the on-going life of Christ and Christ is now living in you and you're living out of the ways of the Reign and Realm of God in the midst of a world that is not there yet, there will be trouble. The same things that got Jesus in trouble with authorities and kinfolk could get you in trouble, too. The same things that happened to Jesus – the misunderstandings, the accusations, the betrayals, the suffering – these could very well happen to you. But your life is bound up in God just like Jesus' and just as it was for Jesus, so too it will be for you: it will all work out in the end because God's got you. However, none of this is to say this will be easy; it is not.

Let's take our own extended house as an example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – the ELCA. This past week there was both a churchwide and a synodical service to commemorate the Emmanuel Nine, those killed at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015 by Dylan Roof ... a young man who had been baptized and confirmed in an ELCA congregation. We didn't recognize this tragic event just because this year is the fifth anniversary. This commemoration is an act of contrition and repentance because, whatever faith formation process we offered, it failed to make white supremacist ideology unthinkable to a young person like Dylan.

We can't dismiss Dylan Roof as a singular bad apple, either. The Commemoration of the Emanuel Nine was a result of the actions taken at last year's Churchwide Assembly as part of the Declaration to People of African Descent made at that assembly. That declaration included a formal apology for racism, discrimination, and quietism regarding white supremacy that was made by Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. The formal response to that apology was given by Reverend Lamont Wells. His remarks initially rejected the apology, then spoke plainly about the work of reconciliation and transformation (which is what repentance really means), and then he did accept the apology as a step in that transformative process. What you do not know, unless you heard it from someone like Pastor Joann Conroy (who was at Churchwide Assembly in a position to be in the know), is that death threats were made to Reverend Wells by some members of that assembly. This was not mentioned in news releases about the assembly; it has not been mentioned in the *Living Lutheran*.

Earlier this year, in the January issue of that churchwide magazine, there was a lead article discussing how to talk about racism and white supremacy. No doubt the subject and timing were also part of that declaration at churchwide. The next month there were a couple letters rejecting the themes of that article. More letters ran in the next two issues, some supporting the original article but others opposing it. If the sample published represents the overall submissions, it's about two letters saying we need to stop talking about this and let it go to every one letter calling us to talk about it.

Racism in all its forms, including the most insidious form often called white privilege, is antithetical to the ways of the Reign and Realm of God where all are welcome, all are valued, all can flourish. Yet talking about it is clearly going to cause division, division in our church families and maybe even withing our nearest and dearest ... and the gospel doesn't seem to allow much wiggle room for any "both sides" talk. Racism has been called this country's original sin and rightly so; it's woven into so much of everything that one never need look very far into any of the inequities to find it lurking there. Part of the work of the good news of the Reign and Realm of God, as Jesus explains in the gospel today, is to reveal what was hidden – both the sin we want to hide, ignore, avoid and the signs of the inbreaking of the Reign and Realm of God ... which we are made to be through baptism ... if we can let God take us deep enough.

Sink into that baptism. Let go of that old life that is only going to end in death one way or another. Join Jesus on the cross and in the tomb so that Christ's resurrection happens within you as well. Rise, child of the light; go live out the Reign and Realm of God as God directs you ... whatever that reign, that way of life requires of you. Don't bother with the risks; God is with you. For you are sent forth in the Name of the Parent, the Rebel, and the Spirit. Amen.