

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

A little over 30 years ago I was sent to a gathering in Chicago to a theological event in which I was to present a paper and write a review of the proceedings. After a bumpy ride and several delays, the plane landed at O’Hare where fellow travelers met to share a van to the hotel on the shores of Lake Michigan. With the exception of one other person, everyone else was a stranger. The shuttle remained silent, including the dour driver, who was on his last trek for the day, and it was obvious he was ready to be done. Once the check-in was complete, little by little the participants began to gather in the bar for a simple dinner and drinks. I found myself seated between two jovial individuals. Their accents betrayed Scandinavian heritage and soon they began to tell ethnic jokes with the names Sven and Ole occurring in each. Initially they were told and received in ‘good humor’, but then the tone shifted, and the barbs got sharper and more pointed. (10,000 Swedes ran through the weeds chased by 1 Norwegian) Wisdom being the better part of valor led me to change seats, and finally the fun ‘broke up’. Later, my friend from Fargo explained the tension. One person was Norwegian and other Swedish. During WWII Sweden declared itself ‘neutral’ to avoid Nazi occupation, while Norway suffered for its resistance. Neutrality simply delayed the inevitable and became an illusory position.

So, let us pose question and ask how you would respond to the following comment. **Every action**, physical, emotional, moral, or spiritual has consequences! **Every action**, physical, emotional, moral, or spiritual has consequences! What I am suggesting to you is there is no such thing as neutrality with regard to the moral and spiritual life for a Christian. In legal matters on occasion, we hear the phrase “victimless crime’. The definition refers to an illegal act in which everyone consents and were ‘no one is harmed.’ That is morally foolish, for the perpetrator is harmed. The quality of his/her sense of right/justice is warped. The compass of life becomes skewed to self-interest and self-service. And in counterpoint, the smallest act of charity may well carry and initiate a stream of impact that continues for a lifetime, both in the recipient and the giver. Consider that young child to whom you have shown loving grace, even in a moment of discipline, who goes on to know they are loved and belong! What kind of future may unfold in that gift?!!!

The Epistle text for today from Romans may seem a little disjointed when read in stand-alone fashion. But when it is connected to its antecedent, the whole of Chapter 6, it makes a rather astonishing set of claims. Paul says that once you have been baptized into Christ, into his death and resurrection, there are consequences. Your life, which had you hand-cuffed to sin and therefore death, has a new key to the lock. No, the handcuffs are still in place, but God is the holder of the key. There is in this a sobering truth; we will be owned in this life by something. It might be by what we own, or a long-held bitterness, or a failure that haunts us and is always playing a role in our decisions. I have known persons who continue to be enslaved over broken relationships with others now long dead. The brilliant shadow cast by being a servant to God’s life grants us His life. Paul says we have received a transfer notice and that is into the realm and dominion of Christ’s grace and life. Ownership here is to be a servant of what is upright, good, true, beautiful, and whole, because God is whole-HOLY.

There are consequences regarding the realm in which we stand. And understand that there is no neutral realm. We are people very much in love with the idea and concept of freedom. Freedom suggests a lack of chains and restrictions and of being self-directed. From the Christian perspective freedom can never be divorced from the values of loving God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves. As humans, Christians are only free within the framework of some lordship. The idea that we can be free from serving God and still achieve lives that are whole is an illusion, because it replaces God with some other finite creature. And all finite things eventually decay and pass away. This is what stands behind the very first commandment to have no other gods—including ourselves.

SERMON – THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 18 JULY 2021

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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Paul is very direct and adamant in his comments. We might even call him prickly as he presents two contrasting ways of being slaves. Understand that he is not a hard-line moralist nor is he puritanical. Puritans are folk who suck the life out of life by being certain that somewhere, somehow, someone is having fun, and it must be prevented. That is not the intent of content of Paul's message. He is urgent because he knows, and so do we at some level, that to serve sin is to have all roads lead back to us and to a cul de sac, and that is called death. Paul in a non-complex sentence, states that the wages of sin, the pay for that condition of life is death. He contrasts the gift of life to the wage of death because a wage is earned. It isn't because of the action of another, but rather what is gleaned from choosing self-centeredness and the pursuit of life free from service.

St. Augustine, in reading Romans, links the reality of physical death to the first sin of Adam and Eve. But Irenaeus of Lyons takes a more subtle stance. He recognizes that decline and death seem to be built into creation, but spiritual death is what happens when we envelope ourselves in service to sin. Spiritual death is more striking than simply physical cessation.

First, it separates us from God, who is the highest good and when we are in communion with Him, we find joy and peace as well as direction and purpose for existence. Serving, or being "enslaved" to God takes away the abyss of my lostness and wandering and confusion, and even more shows a transcendent reality not trapped in decay and death. Sin is that state of life which seeks to live without reference to God or my neighbor beyond what utility they can provide.

Second, sin leads to the death of common sense and ability to see the truth. In Milton's Paradise Lost, it is Satan, the great angel, who finally says, "It is better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven". What an astounding thing to say. It can only be spoken out of pain and deep anger that has lost the vision of God's love, which is a form of hell. I know, because I have been there, and maybe you have as well. You have perhaps known people for whom any attention, even negative, is better than sensing no attention. It derives from a fear of negation, of non-being, when a gracious acceptance offering true freedom is standing immediately available. The late Fred Craddock talked about having an aquarium while in college that was globe shaped, so the fish just swam in circles. He decided to get a larger one to give them more freedom, but then noticed that even with this new environment, they continued to swim following the same old pattern. They traced the imaginary boundaries of their old life. This is what sin does.

Third, sin is what lead us to fear physical death because it destroys our trust in our Father. What is it about temporal death that causes us fear and angst? Is it not the threat of nihilism, of annihilation? It is striking to me that in I Corinthians Paul speaks of those who have met the risen Christ, many of whom are still alive at his writing, but some have "fallen asleep". To fall asleep with the expectation that life will be ours is quite different than the fear of non-being; of being annihilated. The truth is the blotting out of life already happens when we are servants to sin, because there is no future available when we cut ourselves off from God.

Paul pulls a wonderful play on words in our Epistle. Wages and gift are counterposed. Spiritual death is earned by seeking freedom from God. But the gift of eternal life in Christ is what is granted to those who are baptized into the death and life of Jesus. This is not merely life in terms of timelessness, but rather the quality of God's eternity experienced now, and in this moment and place. For those who trust God there is no reason to fear being extinguished by death. The only fear we need have is losing our love and trust of God.

Years ago, I was both a student and teacher of a Korean martial art, which seem like a strange thing for a clergyman to do. But it is not about kicks and punches. It is about discipline and focus and doing battle with your own inner fears. We had a large demonstration scheduled at a college campus. The students came out and showed the skills they had developed, from flexibility to concentration including self-defense abilities and finally to breaking inanimate objects like wood, tiles, and even bricks. I knew in advance that I was to break a 3-inch solid brick and had prepared to do just that. But after I had set up the

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blocks the Grand Master stopped me and came out on the floor with a second brick in his hand, which he placed on top of the first. This I had not counted on and had never done before. I suspect the look on my face gave away the doubt I felt. GM Kim walked over to me and simply asked, "Do you trust me?" In my anxiety I merely nodded yes. He gently said, "I will never ask you to do anything I do not know you are able to do." Somehow both of those bricks broke and crumpled to the floor. I have long suspected it was less my skill and more my trust in him that accomplished it. God in his infinite Grace is merely asking us to trust that his way leads to life not defeat and death. You and I are asked to reckon ourselves as dead to sin, but as fully alive in Him when we trust him more than we trust sin. Amen+