

Lectionary 13A 2017, July 2, 2017, Romans 6:12-23, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

At the start of almost every worship service we begin with what Lutherans call a “brief order for confession.” This brief order is not really a part of the regular liturgy of Word and Sacrament, but its become so traditional that most Lutherans simply assume that it is integral to the rest of the service. Not to include it makes the liturgy seem incomplete to many.

I remember growing up with the confession of sin in the old Service Book and Hymnal, the “red book,” not the “cranberry book” we have now. Some of you may remember the words: “We poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word, and deed.” These were pretty sobering when you are young person. I didn’t exactly know what it meant to say that I am by nature sinful and unclean, but I knew it probably wasn’t good. I was growing up at the beginning of the whole self-esteem movement. Parents, teachers, schools were telling children that they are all special and good and there aren’t really any bad children. Every child is special, Mr. Rogers was telling us. So it seemed strange to say on Sundays that my nature was something different than I heard the other days of the week.

Our new worship book, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, uses language similar to what is now the old Green Book, the Lutheran Book of Worship. In this brief order for confession we say “we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have life undone.” The language is slightly different but the concept is the same. We are held captive to the power of sin. There is a certain sense of sin’s inevitability. We cannot escape its hold over our lives and we constantly need to return to God for forgiveness and grace. That’s why the order for confession is so important for us in our Christian discipleship. We need to hear and know and feel God’s forgiveness and grace through Jesus Christ.

In today’s second reading from Romans, St. Paul seems to be offering a different perspective, seemingly in conflict with the understanding of sin’s inevitability. He says, “Do not let sin exercise dominion (or rule) over your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions...For sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under law but under grace.” Here Paul is telling his readers that sin no longer rules them. It no longer has dominion or power over you. Now, we are listening to one small portion of Paul’s great letter to the Romans. Romans is a letter that it not born in controversy, like Galatians or Corinthians. Here in Romans Paul is laying out in a systematic fashion, his understanding of the what the death and resurrection of Jesus means in the world and in the lives of those who come to believe in him. In what can only be a very brief manner, let me quickly summarize what Paul has said up to this point.

The whole world is held captive to the power of sin and death because all people fail to honor God and obey his will. Death, spiritual death separating us from God is the consequence. God sends commandments, the law, to curb sin’s power, but the law doesn’t save people from death. So God sends his Son whose death and resurrection defeats the power of sin and death. God’s righteousness is available to all which is the power of salvation. All people, Jew and Gentile alike, are made righteous before God, not through obeying God’s law, but by faith in Jesus. Faith is a gift of God’s grace. Grace is now the power of salvation, not the law. Everyone who now believes in Jesus is set free from the power of sin and death because they have died

with Christ in baptism and been raised to a new life. This new life is no longer under the dominion of sin.

Whew, I tried to be brief, but with Paul brevity is hardly possible. Still, I hope you get the point. According to Paul the power of sin is no longer the dominant force in our lives. God's grace is the power now. We are no longer slaves to sin's power because we now live in the household of a new master; the gracious and righteous God who raised Jesus from the dead.

For Paul this new life, this life of grace and forgiveness, is fundamental and foundational. And you must hear this loudly and clearly; you now belong to God. Jesus died and rose for you. You possess new life through your faith in Christ. You are already a new person. And this new person who you are, by virtue of God's grace and love, no longer need to let sin hold power in your life.

Paul at this point is positively positive that we are freed from sin's power. But even this positivity doesn't square with our actual day to day experience. For in spite of the new person we are in Christ, we all know that we continue to sin. Thus our confession before God each week. And yes, it even seems that we are actually "captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." Even Paul will admit later on Romans that "nothing good dwells within me... I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Yes, sin continues to dwell within us. And when we allow ourselves to follow its commands in our lives; that's precisely when we need to return to God and ask for forgiveness.

Yet, in spite of sin's continued presence in our lives, Paul still seems to say that we are capable of not allowing sin to hold power or dominion in our lives. Even though it seems like sin's chains still rattle on our arms and legs keeping us captive, nevertheless we are free, free to live as Christ would have us live. Free to live for God and live for neighbor. The choice is not whether we belong to God or we don't. That choice is already made for us in the death and resurrection of Christ, and in our baptism. We belong to God. That is already established. The choice for us is the extent to which we will serve the remnants and vestiges of sin's dying power in our lives.

There's a story I heard once in another pastor's sermon, put in the context of Native American spirituality. It's the story of a young man looking at the special garment that his grandfather, a great spiritual leader of the tribe, was wearing. On the breast of the garment, two wolves faced one another in conflict. Grandfather explained these wolves told of the ongoing battle of good and evil - like the ongoing battle of sinner and saint within the people of faith. The young man asked his grandfather, "Which of the two is the stronger?" Grandfather answered, "The one that is fed the most."

In relationship with the risen Lord we feed the new nature we have been given. Through his holy Word, and in the Sacraments of grace, in fellowship with other redeemed sinners our new self is nurtured in faith. Continue to feed this new nature and allow the old nature to slowly starve. It no longer needs to be fed because it's already as good as dead.

At the core of this new life is our relationship with the risen Lord Jesus. He grants us new life and a new nature. How can we who have been freed from sin continue to embrace it? We can't. Our new nature won't make room for it. Amen.