

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Wet, Naked, and Named”
Romans 6:1-11
7th Sunday of Easter: Ascension Sunday
May 17, 2015

There’s an ancient Roman city in modern day Syria known as Dura-Europos.¹ In the 1920’s, archeologists working there uncovered a series of crude frescoes on the walls of one of the homes, walls that were surrounding a bathing pool. These frescoes depicted a number of scenes:

a man carrying a lamb on his shoulders,
a women at a well,
two figures standing out on the water while their friends watch from a boat,
three women approaching a tomb.

The archeologists had uncovered the baptistery of what is still the oldest known church in the world.

Almost two thousand years earlier, in the darkness of Easter morning before dawn, lamplight would have illuminated these paintings as new Christians kneeled, completely naked, in the water of this bathing pool turned baptistery.

Of course, the men and women were separated, but one by one, each of these new converts would publicly affirm their faith in Christ and renounce Satan and his demons before being submerged in that cold water three times, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

After their baptism, they were given a white robe and anointed with oil as a sign of their membership of God’s royal priesthood. Then they’d take communion for the first time. This baptism process for new converts was repeated each year at the same time, after several days of preparation and fasting.

Today is the last Sunday of Easter. We didn’t begin Eastertide with a bunch of wet naked people renouncing Satan and his demons at 5 in the morning. It probably wouldn’t draw the same crowd as our breakfast and Easter egg hunt. (...Of course, you never know. We might just have all kinds of people show up for that.)

But two thousand years later, there is still one fundamental thing that hasn’t changed. The Christian life begins with the waters of baptism, waters in which we face two uncomfortable realities: evil and death... in us and in our world. And there in the baptismal waters, we make this audacious claim that neither one, neither evil or death, gets the final word in our life.

¹ From Rachel Held Evans, *Searching For Sunday*, 17-18.

This is our third week with Paul and his letter to the Romans, and we're asking, remember, **“What is the gospel?” “What is the good news”** that Paul says is the power for our salvation.

The first week we looked at Paul's description of the “Righteousness of God”. And we talked about how God's righteousness isn't determined by following some divine legal code that God abides by. And it's not even really about God being perfectly moral. Instead, it's a description of God's relationship toward us.

In other words, God's righteousness isn't about a retributive justice... where punishment must be paid for a crime. Instead of retributive justice, God's righteousness is a restorative justice... where we are being restored and held in relationship despite ourselves... and we're invited to trust this... to believe in “God's unrelenting, ever present love, holding us in relationship, holding us within God's own self.” ...as I put it.

Last week we talked about Paul's personal experience of that love through his own story... and how it has been mysteriously demonstrated for us all in that while we were still sinners, while we were still turned away from God, Christ died for us. It's a mystery that we encounter and take into us every time we come to the table. In the bread and cup, we receive again the love of God that has been and is being poured deep into us.

The Love of God holding us in relationships.
The Love of God being poured into our hearts.

This week Paul has taken us from the Table to the Baptistry, because there is something in our baptism that teaches us about the implications of all this gospel news. In our baptism, the death and resurrection of Jesus move from being a demonstration of God's love, to some something we ourselves participate in. We move from an observer of this mystery, to a participant in this mystery of death and resurrection.

And this is a critical movement for Paul. It's part of why I call him a mystic. Because for Paul, the gospel, the good news, is not simply about what we believe took place in Christ, ***the gospel is that Christ is something, or I should say, someone, we “participate in.”*** Christ is the reality in which we abide.

Or to use heavy theological language, Paul has a **“Participatory Soteriology.”** How's that for showing off my Nerds-R-Us badge? On the off chance that you are less of a nerd than I am, let me just explain what I mean. Your “soteriology” is simply what you believe about “salvation” ...what salvation is and how it works.

So, to say that Paul has a Participatory Soteriology, is simply to say that for Paul, salvation is something that happens because we are participating in the very life of God, as we are participating in the very life of Christ.

To get your theological imaginations around this, think of music at a concert. It's one thing to go to the symphony and be a passive listener to the music that surrounds you.

It's another thing to get caught up in the music... letting it carry you and consume you. And still another thing to be on the stage, part of the music itself, intimately connected with the composer... whose music is now flowing through you. That's participatory soteriology. We are caught up in the music of God. Not only are we enraptured by it, but at some point it begins to flow through you.

These aren't just words or images for Paul. It is our deepest reality. And it's the framework he's always working from. In fact, he has this little phrase that he uses again and again in all his writings that point to this. ***Over 160 times in Paul's letters, he uses the phrase "in Christ." It must be his favorite phrase, his favorite image. Again and again he describes us as "in Christ."***

And the way he uses this phrase, it's pretty obvious he's not just talking about getting in Jesus' good favor and being Jesus' friend. The way Paul uses the word "Christ" it's a whole lot less individual, and a whole lot more cosmic in nature.

For Paul, "Christ" is the all-consuming reality of God in which we exist. You can hear it in Colossians 1, ***"All things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things are held together."***

That cosmic reality is also a very personal reality. You can hear it in that beautiful and profound line in his letter to the Galatians where he writes, ***"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."*** This Christ-Life lives in me.

It's both cosmic and deeply personal...
transcendent and immanently present.

Some theologians have said Paul's phrase "in Christ" is almost like a force field he is describing... or an energy field in which we exist. It's the music of God flowing through us. It's the waters of baptism flowing over us, soaking us... consuming us.

That why for Paul, the Christian message isn't about not about doing things right, it's about doing it with pure intention. Participating in Christ. It's not about being correct; it's about being connected.

Do you hear how different this is from a simple formula of debt and payment? This may be the most powerful and profound contribution of Paul's writings that we've simply neglected or missed whenever we've turned salvation into a rescue from divine punishment.

When the gospel becomes such a simple equation, you get what Bonhoeffer calls ***"cheap grace."*** I heard someone describe a friend in high school who would say, ***"Well, I like to sin. God likes to forgive sin. We make a pretty good pair!"***

That is cheap grace. It's formulaic Christianity. And it's exactly what Paul is trying to warn us against today. ***"Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death."*** he writes, ***"We were therefore buried***

with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too may live a new life.” (Romans 6:3-4)

Death and Resurrection. In our baptism, we are connected to and participating in the death and resurrection of Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem, a saint from the 4th century told the newly baptized believers that **“by this action you died and you were born. For you the saving water was at once a grave and the womb of a mother.”**

Twelve hundred years later during the reformation, Martin Luther would pick up on this idea and describe baptism as the drowning of the old, sinful self...which, he notes, **“is a mighty good swimmer.”**

And that’s the problem isn’t it? That’s what so hard about believing that this is true. Even after our baptism, it seems like sin and death...they still have such power over us. I mean, I’m not sure about you, but since my baptism as a child, I’m pretty sure I’ve sinned something like 3 times.... or maybe a few more.

Of course, the truth is, seems like no matter how hard I try, I’m still grumpy with my kids. I’m still short with my wife. I still let fear drive my anxiety. I still have a hard time being generous in the way I want to be...

Greed is there.

Envy is there.

Pride... this fragile and needy ego is there.

Death is at work in me.

Paul? He knows as much as the rest of us that sin and death are still at work trying to claim us. He talks about that in length in the next chapter where he writes, **“I don’t do what I want to do. And the very thing I don’t want to do, I keep on doing!”** He knows just as well as you and I how screwed up we can be. Despite our best intentions, the mistakes pile up. Despite how much we try, we still make a mess of things.

The good news that Paul is trying to tell us is that these things ***no longer define who we are.*** And we don’t have to allow them to... as much as they try. ***When we do let our sin define us, it’s a whole lot like a resurrected person crawling back into their tomb and lying down in their former grave because they believe that’s where they belong.***

But Paul says that we have been buried with Christ and raised with Christ.

...which means then, that your sin doesn’t define you anymore. It’s not who you are. Your past, your mistakes, they don’t define you.

Even your present, seemingly unending weaknesses and brokenness don’t define you.

Your struggles and darkness don’t define you.

The power of sin and death no longer have claim over you.

***So get up out of the tomb!
You have been raised with Christ!***

You are “in” Christ! ...who is not only raised from the dead but has ascended into the very realm of God. Today is Ascension Sunday. The ascension is an iconic image of our humanity being brought home in God. This is where the resurrection takes us. Just as we come from God, we return to God.

Death and resurrection in Christ, it’s who we are.

Rachel Held Evans, in her new book, *Searching for Sunday*, writes:

“Death and resurrection [is] the impossibility around which every other impossibility of the Christian faith orbits. Baptism declares that God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life, so if you want in on God’s business, you better prepare to follow God to all the rock-bottom, scorched-earth, dead-on-arrival corners of this world—including those in your own heart—because that’s where God works....

Baptism reminds us that there’s no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It’s just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair.”²

In our baptism, we stand before all those things that want to lay claim on us... that want to define us and name us, that seek to possess our identity. We stand naked and unashamed before all those demons—those impulses and temptations, those sins and failures, those empty sales pitches and screwy labels and say, **“I have been claimed by God. I am a beloved child of God and I denounce anything or anyone that says otherwise.”**

Surround by a series of crude frescos in an ancient Roman home, just before sunrise, our ancestors acted out the mysterious truth of Christian identity: **“We are a people who stand totally exposed before evil and death and declare them powerless against [the] love [of God.]”³**

This is the gospel.
May you know it’s power for your salvation.
Amen.

Silent Reflection:

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching For Sunday*, 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

“Death and resurrection. It’s the impossibility around which every other impossibility of the Christian faith orbits.” ~Rachel Held Evans.

“The baptismal sequence of death and resurrection is repeated throughout our pilgrimage.....” ~Olivar Clement