

May 21, 2023, Crossroads UCC

Romans 6: 1-14

What are we to say, then? Are we to continue to sin, in order that God's loving kindness may be multiplied? Heaven forbid! We became dead to sin, and how can we go on living in it? Or can it be that you do not know that all of us who were baptized in Christ Jesus in our baptism shared his death? Consequently, through sharing his death in our baptism, we were buried with him; that just as Christ was raised from the dead by a manifestation of the power of Almighty God, so we also may live a new life. If we have become united with him in dying this death, surely we are also united with him by his resurrection. We recognize the truth that our old self was crucified with Christ, in the order that the body, the stronghold of sin, might be rendered powerless, so that we should no longer be slaves to sin. For the person who has so died has been pronounced righteous and released from sin. And our belief is that as we have shared Christ's death, we will also share his life. We know, indeed, that Christ, having once risen from the dead, will not die again. Death has power over him no longer. For the death that he died was a death to sin, once and for all. But the life that he now lives, he lives for God. So let it be with you – regard yourselves as dead to sin, but as living for God, in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies and compel you to obey its cravings. Do not offer any part of your bodies to sin, in the cause of unrighteousness, but once for all offer yourselves to God (as those who, though once dead, now have life), and devote every part of your bodies to the cause of righteousness. For sin will not lord it over you. You are living under the reign, not of Law, but of love.

Sermon

Mairi Winslow

We are continuing with our study of Paul's letter to the Romans. This is one of Paul's earliest writings and was probably written to several groups of Christ people in the complex metropolis that was Rome. He is writing to people with lives that are very different from ours, in situations that we can only understand intellectually. Our challenge is to find how these words, written to those people so long ago, can help and shape our lives today.

In this passage, Paul goes to a lot of trouble to explain that by following Christ – specifically by being baptized – we have joined Jesus in his death, his burial, and his resurrection. Thus, we, like Jesus, are freed from sin. We should regard ourselves as dead to sin and living for God. We need to keep our bodies from sin, offer ourselves to God, and devote ourselves to righteousness.

When I first started wrestling with this passage, I wasn't impressed. It seemed to be yet another of the "Christ has freed you from sin – go and sin no more" / "Christ has conquered death" passages that we hear so often. I admit that I tend not to find these passages compelling. They seem simplistic and coercive. If Jesus's death freed me from sin, why do I still sin? If Jesus's death means my sins are forgiven, why should I even think about them as sins? If works don't matter, why are there codes of behavior? What is sin, anyway? What does it mean to be released from sin? If death has no power over me, why does it hurt? How can multiple sincere Christians differ so much in what they believe is acceptable?

And so on and so forth, until I find myself in a spiral of doubt and fear and anger and stress.

So, I was tempted to go the easy route: “Sin is bad, but Jesus freed us from it, so try not to sin.” But I wasn’t really comfortable with that, either.

Sigh.

To get anywhere I had to delve deeper and read more and think harder – all of which would have been easier if this hadn’t been such a busy week and if I hadn’t pushed off writing the sermon for so long! And a lot of commentaries I found want to use this passage to talk about baptism, and I didn’t want to go there, either.

Sigh, again.

John and I have been building a new house. I haven’t talked about it much, because I’m a little embarrassed at how big it is. (It’s also wonderful and I love it and eventually I’ll even be able to host church meetings if needed.) Anyway, it’s getting close to being finished, which means we have to begin sorting and packing. For me, that involves going through a lot of books.

As I was sorting I came across this book, *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and newly Discovered Texts*. I think John gave it to me for Christmas several years ago but it got shuffled into a pile and I forgot about it. Anyway, sneaky old God caused me to find it when I was fighting with this passage and it has been a tremendous help. I want to give credit where credit is due – and also recommend it.

Reading this editor’s commentary and reading other parts of Romans and rereading today’s passage, I began to realize that how I interpreted what Paul is saying here about being released from sin was simplistic. He’s actually saying something far more nuanced, and the key to it is in the last line of the passage: “You are living under the reign, not of Law, but of love.” To understand it, we need to look closer at **Law** and its relationship to sin.

Law, both in the sense of the Old Testament Law and in the sense of the collection of laws governing our communities, states, and nations, establishes constraints on the **body**, on our bodies. (Hence Paul’s several references to the body in this passage.) The law defines what we can **do** and not **do**. It does not, cannot, define what we can think or can believe. (Although there are those who wish it could.) It does not define who we are, just how we can act.

Law also implies **sin** or wrongdoing. If you live under the reign of law, what you can do is defined. Failure to obey the law is sin and is to be punished. Again, this is true of all law – religious and secular, although secular law uses the term “crime” instead of “sin”. So the body, which is constrained by Law, can be thought of – and is, by Paul – as the stronghold of sin. Sin or no sin has to do with what the body does.

At its best, Law is designed to protect and help everyone. It is intended to be good. Traffic laws are made to keep people safe from reckless drivers. Laws and regulations about food safety,

labor conditions, and the environment are made to protect consumers from greedy, careless, or thoughtless producers, workers from greedy or self-righteous employers, and the natural world from pollution and destruction. Laws against stealing are to keep the strong or the clever or the sneaky from taking all a less strong or clever or sneaky person has. Laws forbidding murder are to prevent people, the strong and weak, the old and the young, from taking the life of someone else. The Old Testament laws regarding keeping Sabbath were to ensure that people were able to get the rest that they needed. Laws demanding that we honor our fathers and mothers are to preserve the community and ensure that the old are cared for and protected. Etc., etc., etc. Law is **supposed** to make life better for everyone. Laws are needed because human beings are selfish and fearful and often incapable of thinking about what is good for everyone. In a society that believes that laws are supposed to help and protect everyone, laws and law enforcing that blatantly hurt people – the Jim Crow laws, for example, or drawing self-serving congressional districts, or Supreme Court justices who seem to be allowed to be for sale – are shocking and upsetting, even terrifying. We need the law. We need the law to be just, but we need it.

So I'm not trying to abolish the Law. Neither was Paul.

But if you live under the reign of Law, you live under the reign of sin. That is not because the Law is sinful, but because you are living within a worldview based on the fear of punishment. The law prescribes behavior as the key to life. Every flicker of "sin" leads to shame. Every struggle against the law leads to constraint. Every non-thinking act of obedience leads to slavery. That is not what Paul sees as leading to righteousness.

So what else is there? Throughout the letter to the Romans, Paul shows a contrast between **Law** as key to relationships among humans and between humans and God and **trust or faith** as the key to those relationships. If Law is the key, we are nearly always in some degree of sin (is there anyone here who hasn't coveted lately? Or felt unrighteous anger?) – we are conscious of shame – we are enslaved to rules. Sin, not just what we do or don't do, but our awareness of the sin we may be prone to, may have committed, may want to commit – sin rules us.

But by trusting God to the point of dying, dying on a cross, dying in pain and public humiliation – none of which he wanted! – Jesus showed us a new way to live. By the resurrection, God confirmed that this way was God's way. Faith and trust in each other, faith and trust in God allow us to live without fear and without intimidation. If I trust you, I don't have to worry about you harming or cheating me. If I trust God, no matter what the world does to me I know that God is with me and God cares for me. Jesus's resurrection demonstrates that this life is not the end.

When we join with Christ, demonstrated, in Paul's letter, by baptism, we share Jesus's death. By sharing his death, we share his burial. As Christ was raised from the dead by Almighty God, so we are brought into a new life. And in this new life, we are no longer in a world based on law and bounded by sin. We are now under the reign of love, living in faith.

Paul calls on us to devote ourselves to righteousness. Righteousness is acting in accordance with divine law – living as God wants us to live. The Jewish law, and, by-and-large, our laws, also try to lead us to a righteous world. The Law is set up to protect the powerless, to care for the

community, to ensure the wellbeing and safety of all. That is why we obey it. But the Law uses the model of sin and punishment to do this. The law becomes something to tweak, to flout, to get around, to twist, to nitpick. We believe that as long as we are within the law we are good, we are righteous, no matter the obvious consequences of our actions. (Think of the pharisees!) But when we stop relying on the Law to tell us how to be righteous and to punish us when we aren't, we become free to live as God would have us live, to live as Jesus taught us. We help others because that is the righteous thing to do. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, welcome the stranger, love our neighbors, forgive those who hurt us because we know that is how to live in God's realm. We change our thinking from "what does the Law tell me to do" to "what would God want me to do?" or "how can I share and show the love of God in this situation?"

Will we still do wrong things? Of course we will. We will fall short. We will fail. We will find our own fears and interests and angers leading us into doing things we know, if we're honest, that God doesn't want us to do. We will find our own sloth and hesitation and busyness and fatigue keeping us from doing things we know that God wants us to do. But these things no longer define us. We gather our strength, we make amends if we can, we know we are still part of God's realm, and we keep going.

Paul concludes this passage with

So let it be with you – regard yourselves as dead to sin, but as living for God, in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies and compel you to obey its cravings. Do not offer any part of your bodies to sin, in the cause of unrighteousness, but once for all offer yourselves to God (as those who, though once dead, now have life), and devote every part of your bodies to the cause of righteousness. For sin will not lord it over you. You are living under the reign, not of Law, but of love.

The Christ people of Rome – all the early followers of The Way – were at risk. In living by Jesus's teachings, they knew they might need to violate the laws of their cities and their societies. They certainly invited suspicion and animosity from people around them. Sometimes we may find ourselves needing to break unjust or wicked laws; sometimes avowing and following our beliefs may open us to mockery, suspicion, and disrespect. In this letter, Paul wants them, wants **us** to know that following Jesus, that living righteously, that manifesting the realm of God is the right thing to do, even if it is uncomfortable or hard or dangerous. Paul is encouraging them, and us, to stand fast, to trust God, and to live in faith with each other.

And we know that if we aren't sure what to do in some situation, we can consult the prophet Micah: "God has shown you, then, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Trust each other. Trust God. Live in your abundant new life in the realm of God.

Let us pray: Loving God, you have given us new life. We are living under the reign of love, your love. Thank you. Help us. Let us rejoice. Amen.