

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Baptism of the Lord
Sunday, January 12, 2025**

**“Walk in Newness of Life”
Romans 6:1-11**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our Epistle Lesson, from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, begins with an unusual question: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (v. 1). On one level, the idea is simple enough: God’s grace is revealed in God’s forgiveness—so why don’t we behave terribly so that God’s grace may be known more and more? When you put it that way, it sounds silly...though I’ve definitely encountered this line of thinking.

Back when I was a Sunday School teacher in Montreal, I was teaching a lesson about God’s forgiveness—when one young person suddenly perked up, all excited, and asked, “Wait! So whenever I do bad stuff, God forgives me? So I can just keep doing all the bad stuff I want—and God will keep forgiving me, right?” It was evident that—as a Sunday School teacher—my work was cut out for me.

But at least that young person was blunt and honest about it; usually, in the church, this attitude is subtler, more insidious: it’s our expectation of forgiveness without repentance, our desire for grace without discipleship (cf. Bonhoeffer). This is something I think Christians struggle with, whether we realize it or not: we can be a bit too eager to misuse God’s mercy as an excuse for staying stuck in our sinful ways. It’s a self-serving response to the gift of divine mercy, but there it is. I’m reminded of something the early-twentieth century comedian W. C. Fields is reported to have said: when a friend spotted him reading the Bible, Fields explained that he was (quote) “looking for loopholes.”

Yet our Epistle Lesson this morning is about breaking that cycle, breaking that cycle of staying stuck in broken ways because we figure God’s going to forgive us anyhow. St. Paul asks: “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” He says: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death” (vv. 3-4).

This language about death is, well—it’s startling. When Paul says, “Don’t you know you’ve been baptized into death?”—I think our first thought is, “No; we didn’t know that, Paul. Now you’re telling me?” It’s startling, but this is how Paul breaks the cycle: in baptism there’s a death. Our old broken ways die in the waters of baptism: those parts of us that push others down to lift ourselves up, everything in us that turns away from the compassion of Christ—all that, Paul says—all that died in baptism.

Yet Paul pairs this language of death with a turn toward life. According to Paul, in baptism, there’s a death—but that’s for the sake of a new life. For Paul, all the old broken self has got to die, so that—through the waters of baptism—we can be lifted up, as Paul puts it, to “walk in newness of life” (v. 4b).

It's death—then life. And *that's* the pattern that runs through this passage: dying and rising, descending to death and rising to new life, the death of what kills us and the new life of what resurrects us. And in all of this, we can hear the echoes of Easter: the waters of baptism flowing through the tomb of Good Friday then springing up like a fountain on Easter Sunday.

Listen to the rhythms of death and new life in our Lesson:

“Therefore we have been buried with [Christ]

by baptism into death

so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead

by the glory of the Father,

so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him

in a death like his,

we will certainly be united with him

in a resurrection like his.

[I]f we have died with Christ,

we believe that we will also live with him.

The death he died, he died to sin,

once for all;

but the life he lives, he lives to God.

So you also must consider yourselves

dead to sin

and alive to God in Christ Jesus”

(vv. 4-5, 8, 10-11).

By talking about baptism as a death, Paul's driving home the absurdity of returning to old, broken—in his language, “dead”—ways of acting. In answer to that first question—“Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?”—Paul wants to show how ridiculous it is to misuse God's mercy as an excuse for falling back into old ways that died in the baptismal font. As Paul puts it, “How can we who died to sin go on living it?” (v. 2). All that's dead and gone, Paul says; so how could we return to it?

But more than that, why should we want to? And here's where Paul speaks of new life—baptized life—as a kind of liberation, freed from the things that feel like death and freed for something life-giving. Paul writes: “We know that our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin” (vv. 6-7). Baptism is an invitation to live in ways that are freed from what harms us and each other, and freed for serving the God who loves us.

In the end, I think this comes down to who (or what) we're going to serve. For Paul, baptism is a sign that we're freed to serve God, “whose service is perfect freedom.” But what's key is recognizing that it's not a question of *if* we'll serve someone—but *who*?

Because, as Bob Dylan put it:

“You may be an ambassador to England or France

You may like to gamble, you might like to dance

You may be the heavyweight champion of the world

You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody."

Now, obviously baptism isn't magical; this doesn't just happen automatically. As Christians, baptism involves a challenge and a calling—to live in ways that fit with the grace of our baptism. Paul tells us that in baptism, we die and rise to new life, and receive a new Master; so the challenge for us is acknowledge that, to live like it's true, and to serve the Lord who loves us.

Before I was a minister, I worked at a number of coffee shops—I had some positive experiences, and some very negative. In one of those coffee shops, things got miserable. Business was slow, which stressed out the boss—who started lashing out at employees. Everybody was on edge, nervous, walking on eggshells. I remember a model employee weeping in the store room after a harsh encounter with the boss. It was very unhappy, all around.

And if you appeared to stop working—even for a few seconds—you risked getting in trouble with the boss. So my coworkers and I adopted a strategy that we affectionally named “random wipe mode.” Basically, even if all the tasks were done—if the boss was around, you'd pick up a damp cloth and run around wiping indiscriminately, re-wiping freshly cleaned tables, anything to look busy and avoid the boss's wrath.

Then one day, I heard the liberating news that the coffee shop had come under new management: a new owner had swept in and bought the place. We were freed from the miserable treatment of our old boss, and we had the pleasure of serving a new—very kind—boss. But the thing is, I'd been so long under the thumb of the old boss that I still had my old habits. One evening, I was working alongside the new boss: the coffee shop was quiet and clean, all the tasks were complete, and I could have taken a few seconds to rest: but instead, what did I do? I acted as if the old boss was still in charge: I went right into “random wipe mode,” going around re-wiping surfaces that I'd already cleaned. I was under new management, but I was behaving like I was still under the old management. Then my new boss, a really good guy, said to me: “David, what are you doing?” He said: “You can relax; I'm not a tyrant!”

St. Paul tells us that, in baptism, there's a death: the old, broken, ways—everything that turned us away from the compassion of Christ—that's all dead. And baptism is our sign, our reminder, our invitation, our calling—to live in ways that acknowledge that reality. The cycle is broken; we're freed from all those broken ways; we're freed to serve the Lord who loves us. Baptism means that we're under new management; and our new boss is no tyrant. Thank God! Amen.