

### **“OK – Now What?” – Rom 6:1-11**

I imagine that many or most of you have seen the recent articles in the local papers featuring a few of the most “notorious” criminals here in Vancouver? For the most part their crimes are relatively minor ones, to which they are driven by their all-consuming quest for money to fund a crack cocaine habit. Over and over again they are arrested, tried, and convicted of these crimes – in one case as many as 148 times – and then released back into the community where they immediately return to the vicious cycle of self-destruction.

Now please note that I am not about to dump on them ... they have enough demons in their lives that they don’t need me adding fuel to the fires. I’m not even about to rail at a justice system that hopes that kind treatment will result in some miracle turnaround – and who knows, they could even be right?! It seems sadly apparent that these poor unfortunates are long past the point of making right, or good, or healthy, or even sane choices, but one can always hope.

No, my point in highlighting them is the way that the “revolving door” treatment seems to be almost a living example of Paul’s rhetorical question in today’s reading from his letter to the Romans. “What then; should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” We call it a rhetorical question because we don’t think Paul really expected anyone to answer, “doh – that seems like a good idea!” And yet many people do give exactly that answer, although not in so many words.

Now I don’t think too many people – perhaps even no one – sets out to deliberately sin more in order to get more forgiveness from God ... or that “grace may abound.” It is true that some people in childhood fall into patterns of negative behaviours in order to get attention from parents or other adults, but I don’t think very many people consciously or deliberately try the same thing with God.

Nevertheless, it seems that charges of this kind of behaviour, or at least the possibility of such behaviour, seem to have been leveled at Paul regarding his understanding of the meaning of Christ’s death on the cross. You may recall that Paul claims “Christ died for our sins” and further that we are able to receive forgiveness for our sins simply by having faith in Christ. This understanding is not only a central part of Paul’s theology and Christology, it is also a foundational tenet of our Reformed church, that God’s grace – forgiveness and reconciliation – is available for the asking through faith in Christ.

Those who would argue against that understanding often use the argument that if Paul is right then it doesn’t matter what we do – that since there is virtually automatic forgiveness not only is it not a problem if we sin, but the more we sin, the more we are forgiven, and the more God’s grace is evident. It is against this argument that Paul begins here his fuller explanation of what such forgiveness means, and the way that it changes our lives.

For Paul this action of Christ that brings us forgiveness and reconciliation is not some remote, abstract, it-happened-way-over-there event. Christ’s death was not, for Paul, some far-off click of a holy switch that somehow made us OK in God’s sight. Quite the opposite, because for Paul our faith in Christ, and especially our faith proclaimed in our baptism, inextricably links us with Christ in his death. Remember last week, when I talked about Wanhee Joh’s understanding that the kind of binding love that Koreans call “jeong” drew us together into Christ’s death? For Paul the binding force was being “buried with him by baptism into death”, drawing upon the image of the full immersion baptism practiced in his day in which adult believers were “buried” under water. More than that, however, Paul contends not only are we “buried” with Christ in our baptism we are also raised with him into life as we are “raised” up

out of the water of baptism. Can you hear the repeated “with” that Paul uses in this passage – “buried with him”, “united with him”, “crucified with him”, “died with him”, “live with him”?

So here’s Paul’s own answer to his rhetorical question – of course we do not sin the more so that God’s grace may abound, but rather we now embark on a new life in Christ, a new life marked by freedom from the bondage to sin. Now Christ lives, and lives to God, and because we are united through our baptism with him in his death and resurrection, we live to God also. We are, as Paul puts it, “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

OK – now what? How do we live out this new life? What does it look like? Does this mean we can no longer sin? Of course not – we are sinners, redeemed sinners, but sinners none the less. But we are no longer paralyzed by our sins, trapped by our sins, held hostage to our sins. It means that we are aware of how easy it is for us to sin, but also how in our faith we can and do call upon the Spirit of God to help us avoid sinful behaviour.

Of course, we need to take a moment here and clarify what we mean by a sin, or sinning. The easiest way to define sin – and the hardest way to live without sinning – is to understand sin as any action that is not consistent with “living to God in Christ Jesus.” Sounds easy if you say it fast enough, doesn’t it? But to identify that which is not consistent with that kind of living, we have to understand what kind of living God calls us to in Christ Jesus. Probably the most succinct way to understand that kind of living to God is encapsulated in Jesus’ new commandment – love God with all you are, and love your neighbour as you have been loved.

Easy to understand, but so tough to live. It’s tough because to live this way we have to think. In order to live this out we need to be aware of all that we do, and critically examine our actions against the touchstone of loving God/loving others. That’s hard work! More than that it is often painful work, as we discover just how unloving our actions can often be.

It may sometimes seem that our baptism was a long, long time ago, and so how can we keep our “living to God in Christ Jesus” fresh and new, alive and well? The obvious answer is through the very action we are about to take. Just as we are drawn into the death and resurrection of Christ in our baptism so too we are drawn back into his death and resurrection in the sacrament of holy communion. That’s why we in our tradition understand it as a sacrament, a ritual in which God is active through the Holy Spirit and Christ is present with us. Communion is not just a ritual memorial meal, it is an act of refreshing our “withness” with Christ, of renewing and regenerating the oneness with Christ established through our baptism and our faith. Here is where we are reminded of the gift of grace from God, that our sins are forgiven, and we are set back on our feet to continue living to God in Christ Jesus.

As you participate in communion this morning, recognize in it the act, and the moment, when we rise once more, facing the future with hope and assurance, confident that God will be forthcoming with guidance and direction, and ask – OK, now what?