

An Argument for Death

Romans 6:15-23

Sin. Sin is a topic long held by religious folks and it is a topic that becomes quite contentious. In today's passage we read Paul writing to the Roman church regarding sin. Some folks believe that babies are born completely innocent and pure, while others ascribe to the idea of Original Sin. If you're unfamiliar with Original Sin it is the idea that the sin of Adam and Eve, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, has been passed down to every human that has been born. But what about a glass of wine with dinner? Or an after dinner cigarette? Marijuana is now legal in the state for recreational purposes, hmm? Gambling at a legal casino? Sexual orientation, gender identity or expression? Not going to church for reasons X, Y, or Z?

Paul writes that just because we're under grace doesn't mean we should sin. In the beginning of the passage Paul uses the metaphor of either being an obedient slave to either sin or righteousness. Paul is letting the Roman Church know that the choice between being a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness *is* a choice. And how true this is! I recently read an article written by a pastor in the Bible Belt about the difficulties in that region. His basic thought was that for folks in that area being a "Christian" is a matter of identity, one of those boxes that are checked on the legions of paperwork that the government requires people to fill out. So folks who are "Christian" don't really go to Church or do other Christian acts but claim the identity as Christians. Is this sin? When I was in the LDS Church, aka Mormon, we used to label folks like this as "Jack Mormons." Folks that would actively commit sins by LDS standards but come to church every Sunday. As one Bishop put it: "All mouth and no action."

This is where we must consider the nature of sin. It is this last verse in today's scripture that is the heart of the matter. Paul is once again being a Paulie Pessimist. Is the literal price for sin, any sin, unequivocal and immediate death? I think not. Or am I in a building filled with people who have all managed not to sin and fall short of the glory of God? (We can also thank Paul for that lovely bit as it is written in Romans chapter 3.) Over the years this scripture has been used to justify a good many horrible things like hate crimes, murder, and genocide. Today we are definitely tackling one of those scriptures that, and I would love to say

‘only in the past,’ that has been used in horrific ways. It’s almost as if some Christians take this as a directive (“Kill ‘em all and let God sort ‘em out) rather than an *introspective* imperative. Consider the arson of three historic Black churched in southern Louisiana just weeks ago.

Obviously, and I think, I hope, we can agree, that God is not a black hooded executioner striking down every sinner on the planet. Wouldn’t be a lot of folks left, ya’ know. And last I heard we don’t put people to death for petty theft, speeding, writing fraudulent checks, or any number of misdemeanors and most felonies. So, how then do we make meaning of this scripture today?

What needs to happen first is talking about language. The English language is filled with many types of words: preposterous prepositions, confusing conjunctions, nifty nouns, difficult determiners, and irritating interjections. There are two types of words that we need to focus on today: transactional and relational. Here’s an example of transactional. Here’s a Hymnal. I go on e-bay and list it as \$14.99. Some out there pays for it and it gets shipped to them. Transaction complete. (Actual retail value: \$24.99) It’s a one-time thing only. Relational words, however, describe on-going relationships between nouns.

The key here are the types of words used. “The wages of sin is death.” The primary words here, “wages,” “sin,” and, yes, “death,” are relational words, not transactional.

Take wages. This is not a price paid for a hymnal. To extend the Hymnal example to relational would be by renting, or leasing, the Hymnal rather than purchase. Wages are part of the relationship between an employer and an employee. It’s a relationship of trust. The employer trusts that the work gets done and the employee trusts that they will be paid. There is a cyclic element to this relationship. There is the constant cycle of working and getting paid, to turn up the next day and do it all again. This is a continuing relationship that, in theory, doesn’t end.

Sin. Sin gets to be more complex. One definition of sin is it a violation of religious law. What we’re speaking of is willful acts that separate us from God. Obviously, the Bible reads to a great many ‘sins’ beginning in Genesis, a minimum

of 10 more in Exodus, and only God and the Pharisees know how many in Leviticus.

Speaking of Leviticus, I want to take a moment to talk about sin versus abomination. The book of Leviticus calls many things “abominations.” My research shows there are a few words in Greek that translate to abomination. The most common of these is the Greek word ‘ebhah.’ ‘Ebhah’ translates to “primarily that which offend the religious sense of a people.” An example of this would be that it was an abomination for an Israelite to eat with a gentile such as an Egyptian. Reverend Dr. Laurence C. Keene, of our own Disciples of Christ denomination, spoke of abominations which he explained: "When the term abomination is used in the Hebrew Bible it's always used to address a ritual wrong, it never is used to refer to something innately immoral. Eating pork was not innately immoral for a Jew, but it was an abomination because it was a violation of a ritual requirement." So not a *sin* but a ritual wrong. Kinda like skipping on offertory or prayers of the people. It jolts our sense of worship. Not a sin.

But back to sin there are other, subtler things that can separate us from God. Sacrificing a relationship with God for more transient, earthly relationships. One client of mine stopped going to church because he just couldn't quit drinking and using. Maybe it's as simple as “not having the time” to come to know God. Strange that God is present 24/7 wherever we are. There are also many other things that separate us from God that also separate us from other people.

Because sin isn't just about our relationship with God, we can also sin against one another. In this context I'm talking about actions that degrade or destroy a relationship that we have with someone else. The most obvious cases involve relationship infidelity, lying to a friend, gossiping, or engaging in office, or church, politics. Oddly enough though, sinning against another doesn't even have to be someone we *know*. Remember that guy that was speeding and cut you off in traffic? Uh huh. That one. What about that outlandish little girl going ballistic in the grocery store with mom looking on with exhausted indifference? Or that ‘crazy’ guy that mutters and shouts to himself walking the streets? The one we avoid and hide the kids from? Or that teenager downtown that is always asking for money?

Of course, there's one more element to sin: sinning against ourselves. I know the concept of sinning against ourselves can seem a bit odd. This occurs when we don't treat ourselves the way a child of god should be treated. Eating foods that are not healthy for us. Which is **ZERO** judgement on folks that like their wee bit of comfort food on occasion. Not taking medications or getting enough exercise like the doctor suggests. Or not getting enough rest like the doctor says. Not seeing ourselves as "worthy" of getting help with physical or mental health issues. Misusing alcohol or other drugs, whether they are prescribed or not. Overworking and not taking time for self-care. At the end of week if we have become so exhausted, running on empty, and weighed down by so many worldly concerns it seems simpler (one might even say better, more restful, or more pleasant) to say "just stay home" than get dressed and go to church. Trust me, ***I know.*** How do we, a people of the resurrection (that should be familiar to those who were in a church last week,) bring a balance to our spiritual lives?

Finally, death. This one is harder because death can seem to be a transactional word, not a relational one. After all one is either dead or not, yes? How then is death a transactional word in this context? This requires understanding that death doesn't always refer to the body or, perhaps, the soul. We are a people of the resurrection. Contained in Christian faith and belief is the knowledge that there is resurrection from death. So, if the "wages of sin is death" what then dies?

Perhaps it is the death of pride? Of prejudice? Of stereotyping? Of bigotry? Of judgement? Of assumptions? Of thinking the very worst of people? God knows in every age we are masters of believing the worst of people. Perhaps it's realizing that the guy that was speeding and cut you off was hurrying to the hospital for the birth of a child that a doctor said would never be carried to term. Perhaps it's understanding that the single mom just got done working a double shift to keep little Miss Ballistic fed and clothed. Candy wasn't in the budget. It's understanding that the brother who can't quit drinking and using was taught to cope with grief and loss that way and never learned another path.

Mr. Crazy-Shouter? The voices in his head overwhelming him to the point that "normal" life is not even a remote possibility right now? His family? So fatigued with seeing him get better, get worse, get better, and get worse again that the lesser of two pains was to let him go? That pan-handling, homeless teen whose

parents said: “you’re no longer welcome here?” The one who didn’t trust the foster care system and decided the streets would be better. Or worse yet tried the foster system and went “well that sucked.”

It's in understanding that self-care is also a spiritual practice and one absolutely necessary for a healthy spiritual life. We can't glorify the resurrection of Jesus without recognizing the need for spiritual resurrection in ourselves and others. It is understanding that we don't have to do everything ourselves, we have a team, a church family, to support us. It is also understanding that we sometimes need to step out of our comfort zones to serve our church. What's the point of a “fail free zone” when we don't risk failing?

So we come now to understand that death is not an enemy to be avoided but rather an ally to be embraced. It is in embracing this death of pride, of arrogance, of all the things I mentioned minutes ago, that we change. The wages of sin is to allow an old self to die and a better self to be resurrected. Irritation transforms into sympathy. Attitude transcends us into action. We have been entrusted with the teachings of love, not hate. We have been entrusted with the responsibility of radical hospitality, not exclusion from our community. We believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus and must come to embrace the spiritual resurrection, particularly of the outcast, the downtrodden.

It is through this quiet death of pride and hate and prejudice and exclusion that we model ourselves after the resurrected Jesus. And when we do that we silently, with a tranquil spirit, through a humble attitude and righteous action, gently echo an invitation from over 2000 years ago: “Come, follow me.”