

In Christ

Preached on The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
July 11, 2021
Text: Rom. 6: 3-11

“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life...Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him...reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6: 3-4; 8-9; 11)

As with so much in St. Paul, this passage is packed with rich and provocative claims. Is it any wonder that countless scholars have poured over his work for two millennia, and that his words still strike us with their power? Just before this passage, Paul is introducing the problem of antinomianism, which we have touched on before. This is the view that the moral law is not obligatory, given that faith alone is sufficient for salvation.

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

In this chapter, as throughout Romans, the grand theme continually in view is the righteousness of God's character; and the thrust of Paul's words in chapter 6 is that the truly righteous character of God requires that all antinomian license be rejected by the baptized believers who make up the true body of Jesus' disciples. The righteous God requires that representatives of his kingdom on earth *be* righteous.

But someone may object that this is beginning to sound a lot like “works righteousness,” that great enemy of the Reformers. Aren't we justified by faith alone?

Well, let's look at this for a moment. Is faith in Christ merely a belief we hold about him? Some might say yes. Someone else might add that faith involves putting your trust in him. But doesn't trusting in someone involve more than mere mental assent to some statements about them? And here is the rub with the view of justification by faith *alone*. For how alone do you want faith to be? If it is truly by faith "alone" that people are saved, then morality, being something other than faith, is also unnecessary. This is the antinomianism that many saw would follow from such a doctrine. Furthermore, if we insist on sequestering faith in this way, then no rites or ceremonies of the Church are part of saving faith. The sacraments of the Christian faith, such as Baptism and the Holy

Eucharist, should therefore also be classified as so-called "works" that really have nothing to do with salvation.

But what then do we make of Jesus's words tying certain sacraments centrally to following him?

"Except ye eat my flesh and drink my blood ye have no life in you..." (John 6: 53)

"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." (Mark 16:16).

It seems, then, that to hold the belief in justification by faith *alone* we must sever faith from obedience. But how well is that supported in the New Testament, let alone the Old?

In John 12: 42-43 we read that

"many of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God."

This passage certainly implies that mere belief is not enough to justify us before God. And, of course, there is the Book of James.

"What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? (2: 14)

"faith apart from works is barren..." (2: 20)

"You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." (2: 24)

"For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead." (2: 26)

And it should go without saying that Jesus ties being a true disciple with obedience to him in scores of New Testament passages.

So Christian faith involves more than some mental assent. You see, the irony of "justification by faith alone" is that this supposed freedom from "earning" God's approval through works often leads one right back to them. Faith that saves becomes something that all depends on you; hence, you must always be examining yourself to see if you are really *doing* it right. "Do I have enough faith to really be saved?" "How can I gauge that?" "What would constitute evidence that my faith is real and not fake?" "If I am tempted to sin, or truly do sin, does that mean my faith is a fraud?" The doubts come rushing in, and before you know it, faith looks like a bigger "work" than any good deeds or ordinances of the Church could *ever* be.

Now there are actual things that a Christian needs to do; but the most important things that need doing have already been done by God. Our task is to live into them. One thing we must realize is that through what Jesus has done we are made "partakers in Christ." What does this mean?

Well, in the Scriptures we hear about our being “in Adam.” We could also call this our *participation* in Adam. All humanity was in Adam when he disobeyed God, and as a result we inherited the curse of the Fall. We became prisoners of sin and death. But God called Abraham to be a key part of God’s fight against these curses. And God did so not by giving Abraham more commandments, but by making a promise. God promised Abraham that He would use Abraham’s family to redeem all creation and it would begin with the birth of a son. Even though Abraham and Sarah were well beyond child-bearing years, he believed God and it was “counted unto him for righteousness.” He was in Covenant with God—but it was not just reckoned to him as an individual person; it was reckoned to everyone who was “participating in” Abraham. That means all of Abraham’s unborn children who were within him, his seed, were also in the Covenant. This is what Paul calls the promise.

Even when Abraham was all by himself, all his children, who are joint-heirs, were within him. In that sense, Isaac and Jacob sojourned with Abraham. Indeed, even King David sojourned with Abraham, and so did Jesus, because they were in Abraham’s loins. The promise God made to Abraham was a promise made to his seed; that through Abraham and his family a reversal of the curse was underway. Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise and thus the perfection, the finality, of the Abrahamic Covenant. Through Jesus’s own obedience to God the Father, he established the New Covenant. Now the work that God initiated in Abraham has come to fruition in Jesus.

So this makes clear just how powerful it is to participate in someone. Now the question for us is, how exactly does one participate in Jesus Christ? How do we become joined with him? How can we get in? The answer is not merely summoning up enough faith. Sincerity and the desire to grow closer to Jesus are good and virtuous, but they are insufficient. No matter how much we earnestly desire to follow Jesus, we cannot become part of him through our own power, just as we cannot simply decide that we are part of a new family unilaterally. This will not work. What is required is for the new family to agree to receive us. They have to do what is necessary to incorporate us into them. Similarly, we cannot simply decide to be “in Jesus,” or to “participate in Jesus.” This must happen on God’s side—that is, supernaturally.

That is what our Lord has provided for us in Holy Baptism. This is the instrument by which we are incorporated into Jesus Christ himself. Through baptism God takes hold of our lives and binds our mutual destinies to the destiny of Jesus Christ. If we are “in Jesus,” then his destiny is our destiny. Baptism creates this new relation between Christ and the person baptized, the relation of personal indwelling. The person baptized is a new being, a child of God who belongs to a new family. He or she has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into God’s holy Church, and so belongs to God’s covenant people. In the words of Paul,

“if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise...” (Galatians 2:27)

Now we are all aware that many do not have this view of Baptism. Some Protestants may believe that they are to baptize simply because it is one of the two rites commanded by Jesus which we must obey. Others will claim that Baptism is a public declaration of one's commitment to Christ. Still others will characterize it as an induction ceremony, and an affirmation of a church's resolve to support the newly baptized in their Christian journey. There is truth in all of these positions. But these views all have in common the belief that faith is all about what happens between your ears. It is about *your* beliefs, *your* feelings, *your* commitments. Baptism, on this view, doesn't actually *do* anything. Nothing mystical, nothing sacramental, nothing supernatural happens to the person who is baptized. Baptism is an instrument to communicate publicly your (or your parents') faith in Christ.

But all the professions of faith in the world, all our resolutions and good intentions to follow Jesus, will not make us children of God, or enable us to die to sin and walk in newness of life. Baptism is not our instrument of communication; it is God's miraculous action, by which we are born again as God's own children, and by which we are given the faith that we now exercise in Christ Jesus. Paul is saying that we have been moved from one kingdom into another kingdom by the faith of Jesus Christ. We are not "in" Adam anymore, nor are we participating in the Kingdom of Sin and Death. We have died to that kingdom because we have been baptized *into* Jesus Christ and made members of his Body. We are now the true children of Abraham, the Children of God, siblings of Jesus Christ and our destiny is to love God and his creation as he loves us.

So Paul is not just indulging in metaphor, though there is nothing wrong with metaphor. Yet we eventually desire more than just images and turns of phrase. We want to get out of our heads and encounter a solid reality, a reality which is the true object of our deepest desire. But this will involve dying to our rebellious selves, or in Paul's words, the "old man." We cannot do this without being "in Christ," that is, being baptized into him, being made a part of him, and making his identity our identity. Through this unity with Christ, the Christian actually enters the spiritual body of Christ, thus making it true that "in Christ" we are now dead to sin, since Christ died. And because Christ has been raised, death no more has dominion over him, and so none over us.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself..." (2nd Cor. 5: 17-18)

In the Name...