

A Sermon for Every Sunday
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Romans 6:1b-11

As I began to study today's passage from Romans, something the New Testament scholar David Bartlett wrote was helpful to me. He said that to understand what Paul is saying in Romans chapter 6, we need to go back to chapter 5, which is clearly related. In chapter 5 Paul said that God's grace in Jesus Christ was God's answer to human sin. Sin had started with Adam, Paul said. But no matter how great Adam's transgression was, and no matter how greatly humans have sinned *since Adam*, God's grace is greater. God's grace in Jesus Christ is abundantly greater.

Now that he's said this, Paul begins to imagine what conclusions his audience will draw. Like, "If sin is the occasion for grace, maybe ... we should **keep on sinning** so God can **keep on showing us grace**." Imagine: the Prodigal Son comes home from the far country and is offered not just forgiveness but a feast. What if, six months later he thinks, "That worked so well, I'll take another trip. The greater the sin, the greater the grace!"

No, Paul says. In the first part of what we'll read today, he says: that would be ridiculous. Then Paul offers a profoundly theological commentary. David Bartlett suggests it can be summarized in a simple but not simple-minded formula: "Be who you are."

As we wade into Romans, I invite you to listen especially for that message: Be who you are.¹

Romans 6:1–11

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? 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, 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. We know that our old self was crucified with him 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. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over 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.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Thanks be to God.

What I just read for you is part of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, which means he was addressing people who were baptized or, maybe, preparing for baptism. And when Paul was

telling them to *be who they were*, he was telling them to be who *their baptism had made them*. Paul believed baptism transformed people, by giving us a way to share the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And he believed that the new life of a Christian would be evident in two ways.

- 1) Those who had been baptized into Christ would celebrate his victory over death. They would live with him forever.
- 2) Those who had been baptized into Christ would celebrate his conquest of sin. They would live true and holy lives right now.

That is who Christians are: people whose lives show and celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death.

I was on vacation recently, and one of the books I read was Henri Nouwen's *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*. It's not your typical beach read ... but I'd been asked by members of my church for recommendations about books on this topic, because, whatever Christ's victory over death means, it doesn't remove the *reality* of death. Some of my friends, who can see that they're approaching the end of their life are looking for guides to help them prepare. So I packed this book, intending to take a look. Then, during my time away, my cousin's husband died – a man roughly my age. It brought the experience of death closer to home, and I read Nouwen's book to find comfort as much as anything.

Nouwen wrote this little book when someone dear to him had died. That death raised for Nouwen many questions about life and death: Like, is death so terrible that we are better off not thinking or talking about it? Or is it possible to befriend our dying and live open to it, trusting we have nothing to fear? Can we prepare for our death ... maybe with the same attentiveness our parents had in preparing for our birth? Mainly, Nouwen began to wonder how our dying can be *our own* ... as much as our living is our own.

He wrote about three main things.

First, he wrote about how we are all children of God, and the *dependence* we experience at the beginning of our lives and, often, at the end of our lives can remind us of that fact. Nouwen shared an incident that had made this clear to him. He'd been in a terrible accident and needed surgery. Before and after that surgery, he experienced *complete dependence*: on an unknown medical team, for one thing ... and also on God! As he lay helpless (surrounded by that medical team) Nouwen became convinced that *God held him safe*, whether or not he survived that surgery. That realization was incredibly freeing for him! He said: When we know that God holds us safely – whatever happens – we don't have to fear anything or anyone, but can walk through life (and face death, too!) with confidence.

For Nouwen, being *who we are* involves, first of all, that deep understanding that *we are children of God*, dependent on God. This is a reality we share with *every other human being* – because God loves us *all*, and Jesus Christ makes us siblings. That's what Nouwen wrote about next: how Jesus makes us siblings.

He believed that death could help us to understand this, too ... because death is something *all people share*. It's part of what Jesus chose when he became human. And it's what all people face eventually. *How much can our differences matter* when (to a person) we are born powerless, and we die powerless? Nouwen's hope was that this *great human sameness* could help us to find community and solidarity with people all around the world.

The third thing Nouwen highlights in his little book is how, after we die and even *as we die*, we can convey a blessing to future generations. After Jesus died, he sent his friends the Holy Spirit, so they could keep living in the strength of his love. Christians of every time and place have claimed Christ's promise that God's Spirit is poured out on us, too! ... a spirit of wisdom and might and peace and power. That Spirit flows to us and through us.

So ... our deaths may mark the end of our day-to-day existence, but they needn't mark the end of our fruitfulness, as God's Spirit makes us fruitful.

In one of Kate Bowler's recent podcasts, she spoke about a friend who'd conveyed something of Christ's Spirit to her. This was part of a conversation she shared with a theologian named John Swinton; they were talking about ways the church can create a more generous place of belonging for all kinds of people, particularly people who are suffering. John said Christians are called to be communities of friends. And, in the way that Jesus gathered a community that was diverse and pretty obviously broken, we can (and really should) do the same; it's in these strange and vulnerable friendships that we meet Jesus today. And ... *this is a gift the church can give the world!* – the distinctive gift of communities built on grace, not sameness.

Their conversation reminded Kate of her friend Roger, who'd had died a few months earlier. He was the librarian at Duke Divinity School, where Kate works, and they didn't have much in common ... they had little to chat about. But when Kate was being treated for cancer, Roger showed up for every small act. He picked her up from the airport after long trips to the hospital. He made sure the sign-up sheet for food that she didn't say she needed, but definitely needed, was filled in. Kate said their *unlikeness* (hers and Roger's) became the most stable part of a very unstable time. She said, "I couldn't have gotten that if I hadn't been part of a church that was committed to me in a way that, like, a guy at the grocery store was never going to be committed to me. [Roger had made] some kind of *weird covenantal promise* at the beginning of time to actually care about my stupid problems." Then Kate reflected how, when we belong to each other, it's a lot of work."

John said, "But there is great power in small things, isn't there? I think that [transformation] isn't necessarily a huge thing. [He said] We're not called to transform the world. That's God's job. But we are called to transform ourselves. And oftentimes, transformation comes through these small gestures of hope that enable us to find belonging."ⁱⁱ

In response to all of this, I'm thinking: our deaths are final. Roger's death was final. *But there is nothing final about the gift he gave to Kate*: those gestures of care that, even after his death, are helping her to find hope and belonging. When we are *who Christ makes us*, these are

blessings we bring into the world – blessings to strengthen and support the generations who follow.

One more thing about Henri Nouwen's book. I was amused by the conclusion, where Nouwen named the fact that he, a Christian, had written a whole book about dying and said virtually nothing about Christ's resurrection. He shared some reasons for that, then said that, truly, *Christ's resurrection was **the foundation** of his faith*. It was, because Nouwen saw the resurrection as the expression of God's faithfulness to Jesus and to all God's children. It's where God says to all of us, "You are indeed my beloved children, and my love is everlasting." Nouwen said, "The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost." We still have so many questions about life after death – how it will be, how it will look. The resurrection doesn't answer these questions. But it does reveal to us that *love is stronger than death*.

Christians are called to live as people who celebrate Christ's victory over death – the fact that his love, and the love he taught us to show one another ... *this love is stronger than death*.

We are also called to live as people who celebrate Christ's victory over sin. Let me address that for a moment, too, because it's a strange thing to say: that we are dead to sin. Because sin, like death, is still very powerful, and we struggle with it! The theologian Cornelius Plantinga once described sin as being like a tick that burrows deeper when we try to remove it. I can't get that image out of my mind: sin burrowing like a tick. It does harm – sometimes much more than we can see ... and it can feel like sin has a life of its own.

Oftentimes we think of ways people harm other people and God's beautiful creation, when we think about sin. God makes us siblings to one another (like Nouwen said) ... but we sure don't live like it! Every day we hear stories about human beings fighting and killing each other, stories of persecution, war, and starvation all over the world ... hatred, violence, and abuse. In my congregation we pay particular attention to the ways that racism and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender folk have caused tremendous harm. It is our calling – it is *who we are* as followers of Christ – to work in ways that undo this sin and repair this harm. We believe God wants *all of God's children* to know they are *cherished* and to experience love and the fullness of life in practical, tangible ways. We aim to live like that!

This week I got to thinking about another way that sin causes harm, and you and I are called to resist it. Another book I took to the beach was by a therapist named Katherine Morgan Schafler. She tells a story about a woman she met while running group therapy at a rehab center in Brooklyn. This woman, whom she calls Ava, had been four months sober, but this particular evening, Ava shared with the group that she'd been drinking before group, she'd been drunk throughout group, and she planned to go out and drink more afterwards. Katherine was concerned about Ava, and stayed late to talk more with her.

"It's gotta hurt to be back here," Katherine said. And Ava burst into tears. She was ashamed to have fallen off the wagon. That was unfortunate, of course, but what was saddest to Katherine

was how *determined* Ava was to punish herself for the mistake she'd made. Katherine asked Ava what she wanted – what she'd do if she hadn't gotten drunk that night. And Ava said *what she wanted* was to go home and take a hot bath. She'd been cold all day. She was tired and hurting. All she wanted was a bath! But she was stuck in this spiral of shame and self-punishment, so instead of doing what would feel good and be a step toward restoring herself Ava felt compelled to punish herself, by making things worse.

And that is *so common* for us. We live in this culture that promotes punishment as a way of responding to unwanted behavior. The most obvious example is our prison-industrial complex, right? Three-strike laws, solitary confinement, capital punishment. But there are *so many, mundane ways* we punish ourselves when we do things we're ashamed of. Critical self-talk, for example. Comparing ourselves negatively to other people. Self-sabotaging the good in our lives. Denying ourselves the space and time for simple pleasures. Pushing people away when we need them the most. What would our lives look like without this kind of self-punishment?ⁱⁱⁱ That's what Katherine Morgan Schafler is asking ... and it's what the church in Rome was asking, too, and what Paul urged them to imagine. Paul reminds the church that this is why Jesus came – to show us grace that's greater than our sin and mercy that's bigger than our mistakes. Christ has run a bath for us, you could say; clear waters of compassion and forgiveness are just waiting for us to step into them.

To be who we are, *as children of God*, we need to let Christ's waters of compassion and forgiveness rush over us – warm and healing. We need to *enjoy them!* And then ... keep sinning? so grace can abound? No, Paul says. Not on purpose! God knows we'll continue to make mistakes and need forgiveness. But we rise from Christ's waters to take our next steps with as much intention and accountability as we can. That's who we are! And it's how we experience transformation, sometimes: in these small steps we take with hope. We turn away from sin, toward Jesus Christ. And we build the kind of communities he always wanted for us: communities that help us to *hope* that, no matter what else happens, the thing that endures *is love*.

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ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12/commentary-on-romans-61b-11>

ⁱⁱ <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/john-swinton-the-speed-of-love/>

ⁱⁱⁱ 126 Katherine Morgan Schafler, *The Perfectionist's Guide to Losing Control*, <https://www.perfectionistsguide.com/>