

“The First Questions ”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Romans 6:1-14
September 1, 2019 - Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

In the second half of the summer, we have been checking in with Paul’s letter to the Roman church, his long theological masterwork written to a community he had yet to visit.

In the chapters leading up to our reading, Paul has made a really big deal out of sin and grace. We disrupt God’s dream for the world, a world in which we have relationships with God and with others and with creation ruled by God’s law of love, justice, joy, and a holy peace. We sin when we disrupt this dream by not upholding our end of God’s covenant with us. God’s response to this sin is not condemnation, but grace, through the cosmological realignment that has come in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

It seems that someone along the line decided to give Paul a really hard time by asking, “Well, if grace is *so* great, and it’s the response to — the byproduct of — sin, shouldn’t we just keep on sinning a whole bunch to get lots and lots of grace?”

Paul is not amused. Generally, not ever, but particularly with this question. Here is his response to it from chapter 6 of the Letter to the Romans:

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. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Who are you for?” Some of you grew up with this question, and those of you who didn’t did not grow up in the state of Alabama. If you are from the South, even if you’re not from Alabama, I imagine you were able to interpret this question and answer it with alacrity. For those of us who are not properly steeped in sports’ biggest rivalry, the first time we hear “Who are you for?” we wonder if we’re about to

be preached to about some bizarre and dangerous cult, and if it turns out we're talking to a fan of the University of Alabama, well, you might still wonder that a few minutes later. (With all those National Championships, I figure y'all can handle some teasing from your preacher.)

In his novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, John Berendt writes: "If you go to Atlanta, the first question people ask you is, 'What's your business?' In Macon they ask, 'Where do you go to church?' In Augusta they ask your grandmother's maiden name. But in Savannah the first question people ask you is 'What would you like to drink?'"

I asked my wife which questions a Minnesotan would be apt to ask and she replied, "Minnesotans mind their own business." Where I grew up, the first questions you'll get are something like "What do you do?" or "What neighborhood are you from?" or "Which subway stop are you?"

A New Yorker will never ask you which church you go to, which seems to be second or third on the list of questions around here (and dropping). But in that city made up of such a wild and wonderful mix of people, which subway stop you live closest to might tell you that someone lives in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood or, if you haven't figured it out already, that they're Orthodox or Hasidic Jews.

It was with a mixed group of Conservative and Reform Jews that I attended my first Passover Seder when I was in high school. The main event of the Seder is the recounting of the Exodus story. With the story comes the four questions, which are really one main question with four questions that answer it and elicit the story.

Why is this night different from all other nights?

On all other nights we eat leavened products and matzah. Why on this night only matzah?

On all other nights we eat all vegetables. Why on this night only bitter herbs?

On all other nights, we don't dip our food even once. Why on this night do we dip twice?

On all other nights we eat sitting or reclining. Why on this night do we all recline?

Traditionally, the youngest person at the meal asks the questions, usually by singing them. These leading questions point to the formative story for the Jewish people, The Exodus. God's big story of liberation from slavery in Egypt. The story of God making a way where there was none. The story of God raising up a prophet to lead the people out from under Pharaoh's thumb. The story of God making a path through the sea and leading God's covenant people, eventually, out of the wilderness and into a new land, flowing with milk and honey.

Paul is recounting the next big story here.¹ The story of liberation from the fetters of sin and death. The story of being rescued from the grip of an empire-centered world. In this story, it also looks like there's no way forward but certain death at the hands of the empire. And God makes a way. In Christ's death and resurrection, the power of death and sin are defeated. Paul declares that when we enter the waters of baptism, we are baptized into that death, and as we emerge, we are raised in that resurrection. God's covenant people find a completely new life — a life in Christ Jesus.

¹ With thanks to Jeremy Marshall at <https://neoprimitive.wordpress.com/2017/08/18/god-makes-a-way-out-of-no-way-exodus-jesus-and-baptism-romans-61-11-sermon-8-20-2017/>

Paul is not arguing that once you love Jesus you suddenly gain anti-sin superpowers. We will still make mistakes because we are still human. Rather, Paul is arguing that we are living in a totally new realm. We're swimming in different water and breathing different air and seeing by different light. Living in Christ means a new way of life, a new economy, a new mindset, a new worldview.²

In this new creation, we are freed from what held us back before. We are freed from sin and death, though they still exist. But we see and encounter them in a different way in Christ.

In this new life in Christ, we have new priorities. We have a new response to suffering. We have a new way of perceiving the world. And so, I would argue as I try to wrap my brain around all this, we ask new questions. We ask questions based not in fear, but in grace. We ask questions not from shame, but from grace. We ask questions not in sin, but in grace. Our questions change from the questions you ask when you are captive, to the questions you ask when you are set free. With freedom, we look for freedom and when we see it lacking, we ask, "Why is that so?"

Instead of asking, "How do I get enough?" we are freed to ask, "How do I make sure everyone has enough?"

Instead of asking, "How do I rank?" we are freed to ask, "Who is my neighbor?"

Instead of asking, "How do I earn love?" we are freed to ask, "How do I express gratitude?"

In a few weeks we're going to read the story of the beginning of the Exodus, in which a fearful Pharaoh orders that the male children of the Israelites be killed at birth so that he can maintain control. When the midwives engage in holy civil disobedience, Pharaoh's next order is that the babies be thrown into the Nile River.

Perhaps you've heard the parable about the village on a river. One day, babies started appearing in the river, and the villagers started rescuing them. The problem got worse and the rescue efforts more harried. There were lots of questions about how to most effectively rescue the river babies. What could be done to help? But a few of the villagers had different questions: What in the world is going on upstream? Who is throwing babies into the river?

The new life in Christ demands that we ask those harder questions.

We have talked here before about the Brazilian Archbishop Hélder Câmara who worked tirelessly on behalf of the poor in the 1970s and 80s. He's best known for saying, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Jesus filled hungry bellies and healed broken bodies, but he came to save the world, so he asked the harder questions about unjust structures and callous disregard for humanity in the name of religion and allegiances to empire that, for hypocrites, trumped God's Word. These new life questions led to his execution, with the clear message that asking such things ends in death.

But God made a way.

² Thanks to Rev. Marci Auld Glass for this phrasing, at <https://revgalblogpals.org/2019/05/28/narrative-lectionary-romans-61-14/>

The Deacons and I have been trying to get folks to take our printed prayer lists and bring them home in order to remember in prayer throughout the week those named. We've got a big stack of them in the main foyer, on a table where we've had an interactive prayer station that changes every few weeks.

The prayer station has been updated today, and right now it's simply a bunch of paper and pencils and crayons with one big question: Who are you?

I invite you to write the answer that emerges from within.

We could have a whole other sermon about how to answer that question, but for now let's leave it knowing that Paul would expect our answers to be different because of what we know through Jesus. If you asked me who the people of Edgewood Presbyterian Church are, I would say: peacemakers and grace-envelopers and hope-bringers and burden-sharers and dreamers and laborers for the Lord and question-askers.

Holy God of liberation and life, in our day-to-day dwelling and in our life together as a church and a community and a nation, grant us the questions that look for freedom and wonder about holy justice and seek your story in our world. Let these questions reveal grace. And may they be the first questions we ask of ourselves and one another. Amen.