

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday we heard about Michael Patterson, the 8-year old boy from Millborough, Ontario, Canada, whose mom, Elly, found him looking out the window with a sad, thoughtful expression on his face. Even though Michael is a comic-strip character, his heartfelt cry to his mom strikes a chord in many hearts. Sad because Jesus had to die, Michael is hardly comforted with his mom's reassurance and explanation that Jesus died for our sins. "But, Mom!" Michael cries, "I haven't done anything!!!"

Today, meet Joseph, a 14-year old from Greensboro, NC. Actually, Joseph is 47 now, but he'll always be 14 to me. In 1984, I took a group of high school students from First Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, NC to the Montreat Youth Conference. We met Joseph's youth group from a church in Greensboro en route and spent the week together. We all stayed in a dorm at Montreat College and ate in the school dining hall.

One morning, Joseph sat down next to me with his breakfast tray full of bacon and scrambled eggs. He and I greeted each other. Then Joseph reached for the bottle of Texas Pete hot sauce and began to shake some on his eggs. He shook and he shook and he shook. Now, I used to use a lot of hot sauce back in the day, but even I was impressed (and not a little bit worried and curious!). Joseph took a big bite of spicy scrambled eggs and immediately began to make all kinds of distressing sounds. He flapped one hand in front of his mouth as he reached for his water glass with his other hand. I looked at Joseph, and I said, "Well, at least you know not to do that again." And Joseph looked at me and said, "Oh, that's not the first time I've done it!" (I've often thought about Joseph over the years, and wondered how he is doing!!!!)

When I read Romans 6:1-11, Joseph immediately came to mind. There's something familiar about his comment that morning — "Oh, that's not the first time I've done it!" Even though Joseph knew what would happen when he shook so much Texas Pete on his eggs, he did it anyway. As the apostle Paul describes our life under the power of sin, he is well aware of how often we keep on doing what we've always done, even if it's not the best thing for us, even though God has offered us a much better way of life in Jesus Christ. So, we come up with all kinds of explanations and excuses and rationalizations: The devil made me do it. I couldn't help myself. I had no choice.

But that's not true! And that's exactly what Paul is getting at in this section of his letter to the Romans. He told the Roman Christians, "but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." (Romans 5:20) How do you get more grace in your life? Sin more! That sounds like a pretty good deal! Not only do you get to do whatever you want to do, you'll receive even more and more grace for doing just that.

By no means! Not gonna happen! No way, Jose! Paul tells us that is the old life that we've left behind when are in Christ Jesus. We can't just keep on shakin' the Texas Pete bottle as much as we want and expect nothing to happen. No, the vending-machine mentality of life — "I'll do what I want, then put a couple of prayers of repentance in the machine, pull the lever, and get enough of God's grace and forgiveness to make it through another week" — that kind of life just doesn't work.

You see, it's not just a matter of getting by or getting away with what we want to do or trying to appease God or reveling in God's forgiveness with no significant change in our lives. Living that way is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" — "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace says, "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness."

The opposite of "cheap grace" is "costly grace." "Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man [*sic*] his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us."¹

Jesus' call to discipleship is more of a joyful opportunity than an onerous obligation. The choir sang about it beautifully this morning: "I will come to you in the silence, I will lift you from all your fear. You will hear My voice, I claim you as My choice, Be still, and know I am here. Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow Me, I will bring you home. I love you and you are mine. I am the Word that leads all to freedom, I am the peace the world cannot give. I will call your name, embracing all your pain. Stand up, now, walk, and live."²

That last phrase — "Stand up, now, walk, and live" — sums up very well Paul's declaration of good news for us. Using the imagery of baptism, Paul describes our Christian life this way: "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 . . . So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:4,11) "To walk in newness of life" means to conduct yourself as a disciple of Jesus Christ, to live as a child of God, set free from the power of sin, set free to live for God. As one person has said, "Baptism brings about a radical change in our identity, a change that has implications for every aspect of our lives . . . one that opens up new possibilities. There is a 'before' and an 'after.' It is not a demand, but a glorious possibility — to be alive to God."³ Strangely enough, our new identity in Christ — and the glorious possibility to be alive to God — isn't always easy to embrace.

In 1971, the Federal ‘Witness Security Program’ began. It is commonly called the “Witness Protection Program.” Gerald Shur, an attorney in the U.S. Justice Department’s Organized Crime and Racketeering Section in the 1960’s, wanted to find a way to encourage people to testify in court, especially when it meant their lives would be in danger because of their testimony. As of four years ago, more than 18,400 men, women, and children had participated (8,500 witnesses, 9,900 family members) and not one of them has been harmed.

But, Mr. Shur said in an interview, “the transition to a new life doesn’t always come easy. It takes time for them to adjust. But the driving force is ‘If I go back, I’ll be murdered.’” He recalls, “I’ve had witnesses ask me if it’s safe to go home. I never said yes. I always felt there was a risk still there. The program is completely voluntary. While witnesses and their family members are free to return to their former identities, they do so at their own peril.”⁴

That is a pretty good illustration of what Paul is talking about when he describes the new possibility of living for God. Paul would never say yes, it’s safe to go back to the way you were living apart from Christ. There is a risk there. You do so at your own peril. To go back means death in sin; to claim and live into your new identity means life in Christ Jesus.

I have the following written in my quote journal, with no name attached to it: “If it’s not life and death, it’s not life and death.” That gives me some perspective on what’s most important in life. How we conduct ourselves as children of God, how we live out our new identities as disciples of Jesus Christ is a matter of life and death. That’s the way it always is for God’s people.

When Moses gave his farewell speech to God’s people on the banks of the Jordan River, overlooking the Promised Land, he talked to them about life and death. Listen to how similar Moses’ and Paul’s instructions to God’s people are:

Moses: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” (Deuteronomy 30:15)

Paul: “But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” (Romans 6:8)

Moses: “If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:16)

Paul: “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4)

Moses: “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

Paul: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:11)

Moses warned the people of Israel not to think nostalgically about their life in Egypt. He remembered how they grumbled against him and the Lord when they were

in the wilderness, when they said, “We wish we were back in Egypt. We might have been slaves, but at least we had bread to eat. We don’t know what’s going to happen to us out here in this wide-open space now that we’re free.” Paul warned believers not to think nostalgically about their former lives apart from Christ. When they heard God’s call to trust him and follow him into the unknown but wide-open and free possibility of new life in Christ, they were tempted to shake their bottles of Texas Pete some more and say, “This may not be the best thing for me, but at least I know what to expect. I’m not sure what God’s got in store for me.”

My beloved seminary professor and mentor, Dr. Paul Achtemeier, writes about having some small fish in a little round bowl when he was a college student. He eventually got a much larger aquarium and put the little fish in it. He noticed that for quite a while, the little fish continued to swim round and round within the (imaginary) confines of the smaller fishbowl, instead of exploring the new, much larger aquarium.

A book about best business practices uses a similar phenomenon of goldfish to describe why some employees continue to work and act in unhelpful ways. Just like Dr. Achtemeier’s small fish, “the average goldfish still swims around in the same six-inch diameter circle to which it has grown accustomed” when the goldfish bowl is emptied into a bathtub. “The goldfish has so thoroughly internalized the invisible walls of its fishbowl that it can’t see the bigger, accessible environment that now surrounds it. The poor goldfish is either too afraid to explore a bigger space, or it doesn’t know what to do with the opportunity. Sometimes the goldfish simply prefers a small, unchanging space. Accordingly, these fish are misnamed. They’re not really goldfish at all. They’re more aptly described as *soldfish*, *do-what-you’re-told-fish*, *fit-into-this-mold-fish*, and *put-your-talents-on-hold-fish*. They’re bought and sold, and they accept it. And some even like it.”⁵

Dr. Achtemeier says we Christians can be like those small fish, those goldfish who continue to swim around in tight, little circles, despite the glorious opportunity of a brand new aquarium. “That is the danger of the new freedom;” he says, “so accustomed to old ways, Christians run the danger of ignoring their new freedom, as though the old lordship still ruled them.”⁶

Brothers and sisters, here’s the good news! We don’t have to keep on shakin’ our Texas Pete bottles on our eggs, even when we know what’s going to happen. We don’t have to keep swimming around and around in the little circles of our lives. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has opened new possibilities for us, to walk in newness of life, to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God.

It’s not overstating it to say, it really is a matter of life and death.

Let us pray: God of grace, you have brought us from slavery to freedom, from despair to hope, from death to life! We praise you for all that you have done for us. May our lives bring honor and glory to you; in the name of Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection have brought us everlasting life. Amen.

NOTES

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), pp. 47-48.

²*Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), Hymn #177, "I Will Come to You (You Are Mine)."

³Shawnthea Monroe, "Romans 6:1b-11: Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 160, 162.

⁴Gabriel Falcon, "Inside the witness protection program," February 16, 2013, www.cnn.com.

⁵Michelle Gall, *Keep Your Wits About You: Work Smart, Be Happy, Feel Great* (Centennial, CO: Glenbridge Publishing Ltd., 2005), pp. 86-87.

⁶Paul Achtemeier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 110.