

Grace and Freedom I

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Romans 6:1-23

I have kind of figured this out, but not quite, that there will not be a Summer 2020 but rather a continuation of COVID 2020, a seemingly endless season. Yes, school's out for summer. Thanks, Alice Cooper. Yes, people are traveling a bit. But you get the point – instead of a Beach Boys “Endless Summer,” it's “endless Coronavirus.”

I lament that for many reasons – the tragic death toll and the heart-wrenching stories of isolation, and surges or spikes or first or second or third waves and questions of hospital capacity, and, the uncertainty about many things, including what “return to church” will look like and when it might actually happen. Not that I am in a rush to do that – for your sake and our collective health and safety. It just makes planning so much harder when you can't put any specifics in the date column.

I will miss what has traditionally been summer. Blockbuster movies in an overly air-conditioned theater as respite from the heat. Beach reading, though I am not much of a beach reader. Swimming. Cookouts. Baseball – I really, really, really miss baseball. A lot. And I miss, and perhaps you do as well, the opportunity that summer provides to refresh just a little, to rejuvenate. I will take a little time, and I hope you and yours will as well. But it feels different, doesn't it?

What COVID 2020, and the attending season of protests, does offer, is an opportunity. An opportunity to reflect, to reflect on big questions. Who am I? Who are we? What does it mean to be an American? What does it mean to be a person of faith? What is it I plan to do with my one wild and precious life, as Mary Oliver asks? And...where is God in all of this? An opportunity to ponder big questions. Though study after study suggests that working at home and endless Zoom meetings has produced great levels of anxiety and exhaustion – not to mention our national political crises – perhaps we can be stewards of a certain

amount of time to reflect as we determine how we – each of us – and how we – as a church – will engage the world into which God is calling us and engage this critical moment in history.

Faith should help in all of this. Theology should help in all of this. If it doesn't, then the problem is primarily with the theology and not its users. We have demonstrated the capacity to make things complicated, obtuse, but at the end of the day, as at its beginning, the theological touchstones are simple. God so loved the world. Let justice roll down. Love your neighbor. Jesus loves me. Simple, always. Simplistic, never. We have made those affirmations more complicated than need be, in part, I believe, to widen the gap between religious professionals and non-professionals, and, in part, I believe, to help rationalize bad theology or bad ethics that derive from bad theology.

For we Presbyterians, heirs of the Reformed tradition, theology must start with the Bible. What we've done with the Bible – making it complicated, outsourcing its authority to the professionals – has often led to its misuse and misapplication even to this present moment.

In this season of COVID 2020, therefore, I would commend to you the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome. Romans, we call it. Over the past few weeks, and on-and-off for the rest of the summer, we will spend time in Romans. Last Sundays' suggested lectionary text was the first part of Romans chapter 6, and today's is the second half.

Paul makes a continuing case for grace, the clear, simple, often misunderstood vision that God accepts us, welcomes us, loves us, regardless, never for who we are, or aren't, but for who God is. Whether we are simply human, or have been conditioned by the bad theology of what is called "works righteousness," we have trouble believing in grace, trusting grace.

Here's how it goes...We sin, Paul says. We are born into death. That is a given for Paul. But it is not the last word, the final answer. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is. In that first half of Romans 6, Paul assures us that because Christ was raised, we "might walk in newness of life." That is good news – the best news. Death no longer claims us. But because humans are who we are, Paul knows that what we do with that good news might not always conform to God's hopes for us.

Analogies are always imperfect, but here a parental one might help. We as children misbehave. God the parent forgives us. Our choice when forgiven is to go right on misbehaving because we know we will be forgiven again, taking the forgiveness, and the forgiver, for granted, OR, being so grateful for that forgiveness that the living of our days is transformed, that we have no other choice but to live in gratitude. Our response will never be perfect, but the choices are clear. Paul puts it this way: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" No! (6:1-2)

"...if we have died with Christ," Paul continues, "we believe that we will also live with him... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6: 5, 11)

That is the gospel, the theological case, the foundational affirmation of Christianity. Death no longer has dominion. Grace wins.

That theological affirmation has ethical implications. It must, and if it doesn't, it's an incomplete, or a flawed theology. Paul continues. There is lots of talk of sin here, which we don't like, mostly because we know it's true. The things we do. The things we don't do. The thoughts we think. The words we say. Not just on an individual basis, but a communal one. That's what systemic racism is, by the way. Communal sin.

Lots of talk about sin, and again, Paul knows that our tendency is to keep on sinning, and even more boldly, once we receive the promise of grace. Again, Paul says no, loud and clear. Rather than a continuation of sinful, death-dealing ways, "...present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life...For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." (Romans 6:12, 15)

Paul knows we make choices. He uses "slavery" language here, which is potent and problematic at the current moment. Our choices are in who and what we worship, and what following looks like. Will we serve the ways of death? Will we serve ourselves, our worth, our credentials, our delusions, our facades of control? Or will we serve God?

In Paul's language, it's slavery to continued death, or slavery to God that means life, and freedom. Paul states it this way: "But thanks be to God that

you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart...hav(e) been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”
(Romans 6: 17)

If we are “slaves to righteousness,” as Paul says, if we choose to embrace the grace we are offered, we journey toward sanctification, toward holiness. Living holy lives – not perfect lives, not holier-than-thou lives – but holy lives, means that sin no longer defines us, controls us. Righteousness does.

The invitation is to choose God, always, even imperfectly and incompletely. The question isn’t whether we serve, but what we serve; not whether we have obligations but to whom are we obligated; not whether there is accountability but where our accountability lies.

David Lose writes that “where Paul sees freedom as obedience to the will of God, contemporary Americans -- and perhaps this is true of most of humanity -- tend to think of freedom precisely as freedom to do whatever you want, freedom, that is, from being obedient to anything or anyone, a view of freedom that has disastrous consequences.”

Lose continues: “The contemporary understanding of freedom misleads us into believing that, if you are lucky or strong or bold or beautiful and powerful enough, you can live absent any obligations, any commitments, any requirements whatsoever. Paul therefore invites the Christians in Rome -- and by extension all of us -- to consider that the choice before us is not whether to be obedient or free, but rather to what we will be freely obedient.” When we serve grace, we are freed, liberated, unbound.

Anne Lamott writes that “I do not understand at all the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.” Where it meets us – in our full humanity – is transformed through the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of eternal life. Where it leads us Paul calls righteousness, the capacity and the freedom to serve God.

That is the ethical mandate of grace. In this season grace asks us to navigate COVID 2020 – in the personal choices we make and the communal ones. In this season following George Floyd’s murder, grace asks us as well to take stock of our personal behavior and beliefs, words and actions, and our communal ones, life in our homes and work, city and nation, communities and church.

Good theology – and the theology of grace is the best – must lead to righteousness, to ethical living that transforms souls and transforms societies.

As the Third Reich grew in power and Hitler's stranglehold on all things – including the church – strengthened, and the conflation of religion and militarism and nationalism grew, a courageous group of German Christians resisted, identified as the "Confessing Church." They produced the Theological Declaration of Barmen, inspiring generations, including we American Presbyterians, who have included it in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions.

Hear a portion: "As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way, he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures."

Joyful deliverance to a free, grateful service. May we live in such grace, and may we serve with such gratitude. Amen.