

Proper 7A: Romans 6.1b-11

June 25, 2023

The Rev. Scott Walters

"Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." That's a nice enough sentiment. Well, unless you're a sparrow, in which case you might feel a bit undervalued. But the line stands out in our gospel reading today because it's actually a somewhat pleasant and reassuring thing for Jesus to say. In stark contrast to the rest of the passage, in which Matthew seems to have packed together a collection of some of the worst things Jesus ever said.

He begins by establishing, or at least naming, the pecking orders among teachers and disciples, as well as in households, where masters occupy a station higher than slaves. This isn't exactly breaking news. But it's jarring to hear it coming from Jesus, who elsewhere took such interest in people at the margins and in the lower echelons of power.

It's almost as jarring as what comes at the end of the passage, where he seems to say the whole Prince of Peace thing was a misnomer. A week after Father's Day, apparently it's Christian Family Values Day, where we hear that Jesus's mission is not peace, but to tear the nuclear family apart. Anybody feeling a sorry for a preacher who's expected to bring a little good news to the people of God today?

Coward that I am, under these circumstances I'd usually just opt to preach on the Old Testament reading. But the landscape isn't much better over there today. We see Sarah, matriarch of the faith of Jews and Christians alike, jealously insisting that Abraham send an enslaved woman named Hagar out into the desert with her little boy Ishmael. Ishmael being the child Abraham had fathered with Hagar at Sarah's request, if you'll remember.

Maybe we should call today Biblical Family Dynamics Sunday. We've got some pretty juicy material to work with. But I'm not trained in psychotherapy and family systems theory. It's almost enough to send a preacher to an epistle of Paul, of all places, in search of sermon material.

Actually, it is enough. Let's talk about Romans 6. But maybe we'll come back to one or two of the worm cans we've opened after we do.

I do think it's important that one's faith have a center or a guiding narrative through which you look at the world, including the world of the Bible. One way of describing mine is, to use Paul's language, we humans are always falling away from the life of grace and gift, into law and merit. God wants us to live out of gratitude for what's been given to us for free, but we think what we have earned for ourselves is what matters and what makes us matter.

We're picking up Paul mid conversation today. He's been making the case in Romans that, if you want to be justified before God, there's just one thing you have to do: nothing. There's nothing you can do about your justification because it's already been accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. You are justified. Justified by God's abundant grace. Your merit or moral worthiness doesn't factor in the equation at all.

The problem with this scenario is that it's literally unbelievable. I literally can't believe there's a realm in which my worth is a gift, not a personal achievement. A realm in which my worth is a given, not something I'm expected to prove. Faith isn't doing something impossible. It's believing what this world makes unbelievable. That's all that Paul wants us to do. He wants us to trust the gift of our redemption by grace.

Think about this for a minute. We rate the promptness and politeness of Uber drivers and waiters by giving them little stars on our phones. Same goes for the novels and shovels and tiddlywink sets we purchase on Amazon.com. When the Facebook post announcing that Calvary's organ pipes had gone missing was shared more than 2,000 times, Ardelle unhelpfully pointed out that the sermon I'd preached the Sunday before had reached the whopping total of 5.

Maybe these examples are small and silly. The point is that we live in a world that is constantly ranking and taking stock of humans and objects, comparing this to that, her to him, us to them. Wherever we turn we are proving our worth to someone or asking someone to prove theirs to us.

Church is certainly no exception. Nearly 40 years ago I was sitting in the little nondenominational church I grew up in. It was time for communion, which was Welch's and white bread but no less sacred than ours. A retired farmer named Marshall Orcutt stood up to lead that part of the service and said bluntly, "There's nothing I can do about the fact that I want all of you to think I'm a very spiritual person right now."

I've forgotten pretty much everything anybody ever said in every church service I've ever attended, my own words very much included. But I remember what Marshall said that day. I remember it clearly because he was naming that wherever we go in this world we're being rated, judged, compared. And living in order to please or prove ourselves worthy to whoever happens to be doling out the stars is damaging to the human soul.

Paul said if we're to exit that system, the self we've constructed to please that system is going to have to die. The systems of Law and judgment are just too pervasive, and we've just been too deeply shaped by their values to accept the terms of grace and gift.

Thomas Merton put it this way: "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy." The good news for Merton and for St. Paul is that the self that must die isn't really us at all. The self that has to die is the false self we've constructed to please the reviewers, within the church and without, not the true self we've been given by God. Which happens to be the only self God sees and loves and hopes we learn to share freely with the world.

I truly believe coming to know our true selves, our given and forgiven selves, not the ones we've struggled to construct and earn and prove, is the newness of life Paul wants us to walk in. Notice that. It's newness of life he's commending to us. Not being justified to God just so we'll get to heaven one day. Something true and powerful and healing can be released in us when the old false self is buried with Christ, and when your true self comes to life in this world.

I promised we'd glance back over at some of the gospel reading from here. So let's try. That bit about teachers and disciples, masters and slaves continues into a strange reference to the master of the house being called Beelzebul. Beelzebul was a Philistine god that was sometimes shorthand for the Devil. Maybe you know how Jesus's own story will play out. The powers that be in the world who rule by force, powers that can and will kill the body even of Jesus, they will find any community dangerous that does not accept their ratings systems for who matters and who does not. The control they exert was and is the power to kill the body. Jesus says, "So be it. But don't give them your soul. Don't give your true self over to them by creating a false self that will please them."

And the bit about daughters and sons set against fathers and mothers? Well, that's a harder one. But I will say this. I have no regrets for the times I looked at my children with curiosity and wonder about who they were in the deepest and truest parts of themselves. But I wish I'd never needed them to be something else to please a world that has its own ratings systems for worth and goodness. I wish nothing of the world that demands we construct the false self it needs us to

be if we're to be successful or if we're to matter ... I wish none of those forces made their way into my children's lives through me. But they did. Of course they did. Sometimes I needed them to be amazing and smart and good in hopes that the world might rate me as amazing and smart and good. And every time that happened it made the true self in each of us a little harder to find.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I feel wildly blessed and graced beyond measure in the people I've been given to walk closest to through this life. I also know that when the judgments of this Law obsessed world pass through me to them, I pray they have the resources within them to set themselves against me. To see me as an enemy, in a very real way in that moment, to their true selves. I want them to love and trust that they were made worthy by the God of grace who has imbued this creation and each one of us with worth from the beginning. Worth that can't be taken away, but can be covered up and denied.

Maybe you understand the struggle. It might not be most intense in your household. It might be most intense at your job or in your first days without the job that tells you who you are when you retire. It might be at school or on some social media site or, let's be truthful, it might be at church. Calvary folks are lovely and kind. But, take it from me. They're also an easy bunch to feel like an inadequate slacker around if you're not careful.

Whether we verbalize it or not, perhaps we can all take a cue from Marshall in those moments when we feel the age-old need to perform or measure up taking over. If all we can manage in a moment is to think to ourselves, "There's nothing I can do about the fact that I want you to rate me highly right now," that small confession might be all your true self needs to take a breath. And that breath might be all the space your true self needs to take one small step into newness of life.