

Series: Lessons from the Lectionary

Today: The Different Drum

Text: Romans 6:12-23

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Our Lesson from the Common Lectionary takes us to the sixth chapter of Romans today. The last time I preached on this text, we were in the middle of a series on Romans, and it made sense to pick up in the middle of the chapter because we had dealt with the first half the week before. However, in order to really understand his argument today, you have to go back to the beginning of chapter 6 where Paul poses a question: *What shall we say to this? Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound?*

These are the questions Paul is attempting to answer. *What are we to say to this?* The “this” to which Paul refers is the grace of God. In the first five chapters Paul has made his case that we are saved by God’s grace and God’s grace alone, and I found it interesting that when I preached on this text several years ago, a statement that I made caused the most email dialogue I have received in my 15 years as your pastor. It was a good dialogue. People were seeking clarification on this statement that had been part of the sermon. Here is what I said: *There is nothing we can do that will make God love us more or that will make God love us less than God loves us at this very moment.*

This is a difficult concept for some of us, and the fact that it is difficult to grasp should not be surprising since we live in a world where it is hard to imagine that you really can get something for nothing. We are suspect of relationship where love is unconditional because we have experienced so little of it in our lives.

However, while grace is a free gift from God, it is not cheap. God paid a high price to be able to offer unconditional love: the sacrificial death of God’s son, Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

Because God was willing to accept the death of Jesus as payment for the original sin of Adam and Eve,

as well as all of the little sins which keep us separate from God, the gift of love which God offers is free, but not cheap. As clear as I have tried to make that message in my tenure with you, there are some for whom it is still a difficult message to understand.

A colleague of mine, who was preaching on today's text which is about creating the right environment for the grace of God to overflow in us, told a story at a meeting we were attending which illustrates how difficult it is for people to hear and accept such a message. For visual effect, four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a jar of vodka. The second worm was put into a jar of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put into a jar of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm was put into a jar of good clean soil.

He went on to preach about nurturing the right environment for faith to grow, and at the conclusion of the sermon, the pastor reported the following results: The first worm in alcohol - Dead. The second worm in cigarette smoke - Dead. Third worm in chocolate syrup - Dead. The fourth worm in good clean soil - Alive. So then he asked the congregation – *“What can you learn from this demonstration?”*

A little old lady in the back, who had clearly missed the point of the illustration, quickly raised her hand and said, "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

A NEW PARADIGM

Paul suggests a new paradigm: instead of avoiding things that are wrong, focus on doing things that are right for the right reasons. Instead of living by the letter of the Law, live instead by the spirit of Grace.

Any of us who have raised children know that the worst way to change the behavior of a child is to tell them that they cannot do something. Tell any child that they will be punished if they behave in a certain way; they are most likely to test the limits by behaving exactly in the way you have described.

When Janet Ressler was on our staff working with the children, she taught me a lot about working to change children's behavior. She would say, "Thank you, Matt, for raising your hand when you want to ask a question," or "Thank you, Alisa, for not running in the halls." It is so much easier to respond to a positive instruction rather than a negative instruction.

In his commentary on this passage, Stuart Briscoe reminds us that the Puritans used to say it this way: *"God does not take away the ability to sin; He gives us the power not to sin."* He goes on to use the example of a remote control on a television set. *"If television sets were made without on/off switches and we were chained to our seats in front of them and our eyes were held open by mechanical means, we would have no option but to watch everything on the screen. But we all have the option to watch or not to watch. It requires the simple choice to change the channel or turn off the set. In Christ we have been given an 'off' switch—the ability to say no and the instructions to do it."* (Briscoe, Stuart, "Romans," Communicators Commentary, pp. 136-137)

This is what the grace of God does for us in Paul's mind. It re-patterns our brains. It puts the choice back in our hands. When we were living under the letter of the Law, we may be able to deceive ourselves into thinking that we can somehow earn God's favor. The opposite is true, as well. We may believe that what we had done was so bad that God could never love us. As soon as we are thinking that way, sin has a foothold in our lives. There is no freedom to choose because we were either legalists or hedonists. Grace gives us the freedom to choose again.

In a recent interview in *The Sun Magazine* (an independent news magazine published in North Carolina), Sister Helen Prejean, the author of the book *Dead Man Walking*, talked about Lloyd LeBlanc. Lloyd is the father of David LeBlanc, a 17-year-old who was murdered by Patrick and Eddie Sonnier. When neighbors started harassing Ms. Sonnier for her sons' actions, Lloyd Leblanc came to her house

with a basket of fruit. Lloyd told Ms. Sonnier that he was a parent too, and he understood that she wasn't responsible for the murder.

Utterly amazed by this act of forgiveness, the interviewer asked Prejean, "How does a parent do such a thing?" Helen Prejean replied with the following story:

Lloyd told me how the sheriff had brought him to the morgue to identify his son's body. David was a beautiful kid, 17-years-old. He had been shot in the back of the head, and when the sheriff pulled his body out on the cold tray ... Lloyd—who was good with his hands and could fix things—looked down at his son and thought, *I can't fix this*. And he began to pray. He came to the line in the Our Father about forgiving those who trespass against us. "I didn't feel it," he said, "but I knew that was where I had to go." And that is where he went.

It took hard work to believe that God could love those two boys equally as much as God loved Lloyd's son, but he did it. In the end he was able to say that forgiveness wasn't about them anyway. It was what he needed to do. Lloyd embodies forgiveness—not just something we can do for others, but forgiveness ... that says, *I am not going to let this anger and hatred kill me. I'm going to remain kind and loving*. [Forgiveness] is a path, not a single act. One's commitment to it has to be renewed every day. [Source: David Cook, "And Justice for All," *The Sun* (August 2010), p. 11]

THE DIFFERENT DRUM

Paul's whole message in chapter six has to do with marching to the beat of a different drum. In our culture today we are surrounded with drumbeats which are designed to distract us from the most essential things in life. Paul calls these distractions sin because they keep us from giving our full allegiance to God. We worship at the altars of wealth, political power, social prestige, sexual gratification, and we lose sight of what is really important in our lives. Paul says we are to listen for the

drumbeat of a different drum calling us to live our lives fully and completely instead of following the drumbeat which leads to a dead end.

In his book, What Good Is God?, Philip Yancey writes about being invited to speak at a conference on ministry to women in prostitution. After some discussion with his wife, Yancey agreed to accept the invitation as long as he could have the opportunity to question the women and hear their stories.

At the end of the conference Yancey had the following conversation with the women: I had time for one more question. "Did you know that Jesus referred to your profession? Let me read you what he said: 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.' He was speaking to the religious authorities of his day. What do you think Jesus meant? Why did he single out prostitutes?"

After several minutes of silence a young woman from Eastern Europe spoke up in her broken English. "Everyone, she has someone to look down on. Not us. We are at the low. Our families, they feel shame for us. No mother nowhere looks at her little girl and says, 'Honey, when you grow up I want you be good prostitute.' Most places, we are breaking the law. Believe me; we know how people feel about us. People call us names: whore, slut, hooker, harlot. We feel it too. We are the bottom. And sometimes when you are at the low, you cry for help. So when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that."

[Source: What Good Is God?, by Philip Yancey, p. 75]

Grace. It is the thing which helps us re-pattern our brain. We respond to grace, not to Law. Out of thanksgiving for the gift of grace we have received, we order our lives to give praise and honor to God. Which is why Christians say, Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.