

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for June 12, 2016 ~ Proper 6C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

The Abbey of Gethsemane is nestled in the knobs of Kentucky about an hour's drive south of Louisville. I spent ten days there one spring in reflection and retreat. One of the reasons I went to this particular monastery is that it was for 27 years the home of Thomas Merton. This Trappist monk, who in his writings probed so much of the meaning of the Christian journey, sought to establish dialogue between monks of the Christian tradition and those of the Buddhist east. In a remarkable encounter with the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists, the Dalai Lama asked Merton this probing question, "What do your vows oblige you to do? Do they simply constitute an agreement to stick around for life in the monastery? Or, do they imply a commitment to a life of progress up certain mystical steps?"

This was Merton's response: "I believe they can be interpreted as a commitment to a total inner transformation of one sort of another, a commitment to become a completely new person. No matter where one attempts to do this, that remains the essential thing." Merton described not only the meaning of his monastic vows, but also the meaning of our baptismal vows and of all Christian commitment. We become Christian not for the purpose of "sticking around" the Church, but to begin a journey, a journey to of transformation in which we become new persons in Christ.

St. Paul holds out this possibility in his Letter to the Galatians. In a continuation of the moving personal sharing of his soul, Paul unfolds for the meaning of this new life where freedom begins. He illuminates the sharp contrast between the old life and the new by citing an instance in which he opposed making a distinction between Jews and Gentiles, which Jewish law allowed, but not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Then he goes on to speak of the Gospel as he knew it and had experienced it. He had once been a slave to the law. When the grace of Christ filled his life, he realized that following the law was getting him nothing and he was set free to live a new life. So great was the contrast between the old Paul and the new Paul, he describes his being now as "a new creature." Here's what he says about the new life in Christ:

"I have been put to death with Christ on the cross." His sacrifice is united with Christ's. How we look at sacrifice is a huge factor in determining how we live. For the ancients, sacrifice was an offering made to a deity in the hope that the deity would accept the sacrifice and recognize the one making the sacrifice. If sacrifice for us is making an exerted effort to prove ourselves, to earn goodwill or favor, to entitle ourselves, we will never be fully satisfied with the results. It was this view of things that put Christ on the cross. But in going to the cross, he turned around the idea of sacrifice so that it could be understood in a new way. Now sacrifice is understood in terms of God's identification with humanity. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice because Jesus is God. God in Christ was put to death by those who thought they were doing a good thing, obeying the law, pursuing a heretic. But the real sacrifice was God's own work. It was not the goodness of humanity that put Christ on the cross. It was God's goodness.

We are recognized not because of our sacrifice but because of Christ's. For St. Paul, to be crucified with Christ was not just imagery. It was an experiential fact. He experienced death by water in his baptism. The former self, the former sins, the former attitudes, all died. A new creature had emerged.

Paul goes on to speak of the result of being crucified with Christ: **"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."** To share his cross is to share his risen life. His life is the source of our life.

The source of our life also determines how we live. If the source of our life is “all the vain things that charm” us most in the world around us, our life will be limited to our own materialistic, secularistic, hedonistic perspective. It will be limited to the size of our houses, the speed and luster of our automobiles, the number of our friends, the sum of our bank accounts, the transitory tingles of our sexuality, and the impotence of our politics. For St. Paul, sin is the presumption that we can derive life from the things about us. God shows us that is backwards. God gives us life and a great potential. It is ours to receive as a gift. Christ, in whom humanity and divinity intersect, is the source of that life.

In Paul’s encounter with the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus, he had what Thomas Merton described as a “breakthrough to the already.” Whenever I think of such a breakthrough, the image comes to mind of a person riding on a horse looking for a horse to ride. Here was somebody anxiously surveying the whole terrain trying to find something when all along what he most wanted was right beneath him. This is the great truth of being saved by grace. We do not earn our worth by what we do. It was given to us by the great generosity of God at the moment of our conception.

When we experience Christ’s pardon and power, we know there is within us a source of life that is limitless. We know that we are not fully alive until Christ lives within us.

One more thing: Paul speaks of living by faith as the way for new creatures to remain truly free. **“This life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me.”**

Our understanding of true freedom influences how we live and the witness we make in the world. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians has been referred to as “The Manifesto of Christian Freedom.” A little further on, Paul writes, “For freedom, Christ has set you free.” And this is the message we proclaim to the world at our doorstep. It is a message of hope to those who suffer – from oppression and war, from natural disaster and human error, or from alienation and isolation. It is a message of courage for those facing weighty decisions. It is an ethical message for those whose actions affect the lives of others. It is a message of exhortation for those who wish to wage peace. Living faith is putting the new life we live to work in word and deed for the sake of the world. We are to live as we pray, “O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom.”

A Baltimore pastor, as the speaker at a student conference at Johns Hopkins University, learned one of the deepest lessons of his life during a question period that followed his talk. A young man who was not a Christian said, “I know you are a busy man and I for one want to thank you for giving us your time and thoughts tonight. You have helped me and I respect the statement of your faith. What you have said has interested me. However, I am much more interested in why you believe what you do than in a statement of what you believe. I would stay here all night if you would tell us why you believe in Christ.”

Why do you believe in Christ? Why do I? Why does St. Paul? You all know the answer. We believe in Christ, we trust in him, we are willing to surrender to him because he gave his life for us and it changed us. We are changing still. And we will continue to change for the better, to become more fully alive, so long as we walk by faith, constantly identifying with the Christ who gave himself for us and constantly feeling his life reconstructing the image of God within. This is where true freedom begins. Set free from all that binds us to what limits life and given the power to become new persons in Christ. His victory is ours! Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.