

Pentecost 4A June 28 2020
Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen. *What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.* Let's pray:

A pastor, a rabbi, and a sheikh walk into a bar and the barman says, "You've got to be joking!" D'you like that one? Come on, have a giggle. That's nearly as humorous as the honesty of some parishioners. A pastor was visiting a new parishioner and asked, "How's your relationship with God?" The parishioner replied, "Oh, we're great mates, Pastor. I like sinning. God likes forgiving. Win, win."

Actually, that last bit is an adaptation of some lines from W. H. Auden's poem, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. In the poem, King Herod responds to the magi's news of the Saviour's birth and the grace and forgiveness it brings, with these words:

'Every crook will argue: "I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged."' *

I must admit, I kinda' like the "admirably arranged" world Auden describes. It's comfortable. It's easy. It doesn't demand anything from me. I can apologise to you when I've done something wrong or hurtful, ask God to "please forgive me," and get on with my life. Business as usual. I get to do what I like and God gets to do what God likes.

How about you? Does any of this sound familiar or relate to you? Does your life and faith sometimes look like Auden's "admirably arranged" world? I've seen it in the lives of others and I've been on the receiving end of this laissez faire attitude plenty of times myself. And to be unbiased, I know that at times I've lived my life like this. I've undoubtedly acted this way toward some of you. Please forgive me and accept my humble, sincere, and heartfelt apology.

The problem with an "admirably arranged" world is that wounds aren't healed. Relationships aren't restored. Lives aren't transformed. Nothing really changes. Too often we settle for an "admirably arranged" world instead of becoming, as we prayed for in today's collect, "willing servants."

We're not, however, the first or the only ones to think or live this way. Long before Auden penned his lines, St Paul dealt with the same issue in his Letter to the Romans. "What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 6:15)

Our relationship with God in Christ is more than an admirable arrangement. We have an identity with Christ. "Whoever welcomes you," Jesus tells his disciples, "welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Matthew 10:41). By our baptism we have been immersed in Jesus' death and resurrection. We share his life. We have been Christ-ened or Christ-ed or Christ-liked. We speak with his mouth, see with his eyes, walk with his feet, touch with his hands. That means we now re-present Christ to the world. We live his life in this time and place.

Sometimes, however, we choose not to live that life. We turn away. We deny ourselves the life Jesus has given us. We live less than who we most truly are. St Paul calls that sin. And sin isn't simply a question of good or bad, right or wrong, keeping or breaking rules. Ultimately, it's a choice between life and death.

Maybe that's why St Paul is so insistent in his Letter to the Romans. Christ is our way and our life. We are a part of him and he is who we are and who we are to become. What St Paul is telling us is to become who we really are; who we were created to be.

- Don't sin.
- Don't be an instrument of wickedness.
- Present yourselves to God.
- Be an instrument of God's righteousness.

St Paul is like the parent who says to his or her child, "Do this. Don't do that. Always do your best." As a child we hear those words as harsh, critical, judgemental. However, loving parents, good parents, say those words because they see more in their child than what they themselves see. Such words call their child into the fullness of life, to be whole, complete, and fully alive. That's what St Paul is doing.

Personally, I am squeamishly grateful for Paul's words, because he pushes me to examine my life and see the ways in which I have denied myself the life I know I want. Paul challenges me to examine my choices. In Christ, the gospel frees us to make choices about whom we listen to, and to whom we give ourselves and our obedience. In Christ, there is freedom and choice.

Please don't think that by talking about choice, I'm trying to cheapen grace. I'm not using grace as a get-out-of-jail-free card. I'm not denying God's grace. Rather, I'm pointing to grace as the power of God's love and the means of God's presence that enables us to make a different choice, a better choice, a choice to live and to love as Jesus. That's something an "admirably arranged" world can never give us.

The crook of whom King Herod speaks will be forever sneaking around, hiding in the dark, and living in fear of being found out. That's no way to live and it's not the life Jesus died for either. That kind of life is a living death. It leaves us empty, hollow, and impoverished. We weren't created for that.

We've been freed from that, freed from the power of sin, freed to live as Jesus' disciples - followers and doers of his grace. Jesus has freed us to put ourselves behind all others, to love and serve all others, and to proclaim his name in all we do. Jesus speaks of a reward for those who are servants of all, and for those who help the people who belong to him, no matter how seemingly insignificant - "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple" will receive their reward (Matthew 10:42). **

Jesus is the example we follow. He didn't seek greatness. Jesus sought to obey his Father who is great. Jesus is our servant King, the Lamb of God, who humbled himself and died on the cross to save us from our sins and to give us eternal life with him – because he loves us. Jesus taught us that if we seek, we shall find – we shall find that God is great, God gives us good things, and God is holding us in the palm of his hand always. **

Dear Saints, by God's grace we are safe, free, and can be confident to welcome, invite, and receive others in Jesus' name for the sake of God's holy kingdom. We don't need to sneak around. We don't need to hide or shy away from others. We don't need to fear. We don't need to live "admirably arranged" lives. Instead, we "have been freed from sin and enslaved to God" with the promise of "God's free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:22,23). I can think of no greater reward. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

* The Massacre of the Innocents [From *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, by W.H. Auden]
<http://teologiskesmuler.blogspot.com/2015/12/the-massacre-of-innocents-by-wh-auden.html> accessed 22/06/2020.

** Adapted from *Devotion 15*, Dr Katherine Bensted, 24/06/2020.
