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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Romans 6.1-23
Matthew 10.40-42

By No Means!

“What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!” – Romans 6.15

When our Congregational forebears landed at Plymouth Rock, they were in a complex ecclesiastical situation. They were breaking away from the Church of England—setting out to create something more faithful and pure, something fresh in a new land. And yet they were more tied to the old than they realized. Most of what they had learned about how to “be church” they had learned from the very institution they were leaving behind. They were living in a time that combined “the already” with the “not yet.” One of my favorite examples of this odd situation is how they handled the ordination of ministers. They just *knew* that ministers had to be ordained, but they never (yet) dreamed that they could ordain ministers themselves! In time, practices of ordination developed in New England, but initially the only way that the new world Congregationalists could get clergy was to persuade already ordained clergy to leave the Church of England. Once again, they looked to Anglicanism for what they could not yet find in Congregationalism. They were in between times.

I think we all know about such times in our personal lives. When future parents are awaiting the birth of a child...things are beginning to change, but they haven't changed completely. When a loved one is dying, we know the end is near, but it isn't real yet. When someone is between jobs or careers this strange “already/not yet” feeling often ensues. I've been thinking a lot of Pastor Curt in this regard lately. He's still doing great ministry with us here in Longmeadow, but I'm sure his heart is feeling many tugs toward Colorado. He's already making some lead pastor decisions for his new congregation in the Promised Land, but he's still under Pharaoh's harsh thumb here in Egypt. (Oh, wait...I guess that metaphor is not

very flattering to me!) I remember it well from just a bit over six years ago myself. I was still saying good-bye and tying up loose ends in Ellington, but I was also sneaking up to Longmeadow for Stewardship Committee meetings. Already...but not yet.

In his letter to the Romans, one of the themes that draws Paul's careful attention is the "already, but not yet-ness" of Christian existence. For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the central event that has forever changed reality. As Christians living in the age between the resurrection of Jesus and the final resurrection of all, we live very much in the midst of the resurrection event—an event which has been, we might say, inaugurated but not completed. Because of this, our Christian self-understanding is complex. We are saved. We are recipients of grace. And yet we are being transformed for live in a new realm. As Leander Keck puts it, our self-image is a "christologically determined paradox."¹

The Letter to the Romans never makes for *easy* reading, but it always rewards sustained attention. Because you did so well in last week's interactive Bible experiment, I decided to lengthen today's passage from what the lectionary assigned. We'll be looking at the whole of Chapter 6. (Page 186 in the New Testament of the pew Bible.)

More than perhaps any book of the Bible, Romans resists any efforts to over-simplify Christianity. Paul is concerned with getting the details and nuances right and he never wants to "boil down" our faith to an easy mantra or slogan. One of the great rhetorical methods that he uses is that he employs the voice of an imagined interlocutor to ask questions. He then tees off on those questions with passionately and energetically reasoned arguments. For his "tee shot," he often uses the fun little phrase, "By no means!" (Used 10 times in the entire letter.)

At the end of chapter 5, Paul proclaimed that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." (5.20) The over-simplifying, reductionist voice then interjects at the beginning of chapter 6, "What then should we say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" To which Paul responds, "By no means!" (6.1-2) It might appear that Paul is insisting on mere common sense—Of course grace doesn't give a license to sin!—but there is more at stake here. Many new Christians of his era—especially the worldly lot over in

Corinth—believed that their conversion to Christianity freed them from all relational responsibility and ethical obligation. Paul may be remembering the likes of the Corinthians as he makes the case that our new condition transforms, rather than removes, our obligations to one another. As David Bartlett puts it, “Paul does not think that grace frees us from responsible obedience. Grace shapes us into responsible and obedient people.”²

Paul then goes on to talk about how we have been baptized into Christ and, therefore, into his death. If this language sounds familiar, that is because it is often part of our Baptism liturgy. In Baptism “into Christ” we share Christ’s eternal significance by entering into it and making it the authority for our lives. Baptism changes who we are, and therefore, what might reasonably be expected of us. When we persist in sin, Paul speaks to us like a disappointed parent saying, “That isn’t like you at all!”³

The big payoff of our baptism into Christ’s death comes in verse 5: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Our union with Christ is not only beneficial, but it is also indissoluble. In the Greek Paul says we have become *symphytoi*, which literally means we have “grown together” (a *phytos* is a plant). Think of two plants that have not just intertwined but have actually been grafted together. This is God’s work in us—we don’t decide to be one with Christ or just imagine what it would be like. This is not mere will or psychology. This is God’s doing.⁴

From this foundation of Baptism, Paul goes on to make clear that we are citizens of a new age. In this new age, as we see in verse 14, “Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” Once again the Interlocutor wants to dumb-down the message, asking, “What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”

And Paul’s answer? By no means! He then goes on to speak of slavery, which is bewildering to us. We don’t see anything good about slavery, but in Paul’s day slavery was sometimes chosen as a way to avoid destitution or, even, to undertake social advancement. In the context of his time, Paul understood that there were good masters and bad masters. The choice was not whether or not to serve a master—Paul believed, along with Bob Dylan, “you’re

gonna serve somebody—but rather the choice was between the harsh master of sin and the benevolent master of God. For Paul, “there are loyalties that liberate.”⁵

In the last verse of the chapter, verse 23, Paul makes the case that sin pays wages—wages, which unfortunately kill us—but God gives gifts. In this whole chapter, Paul is helping us to examine and explore our situation as Christians who live in this time of “already, but not yet” when we are no longer slaves to sin, but when God’s whole creation is not yet complete. We have a new freedom that we didn’t have before. This is really the core of Pauline (and later Reformation) theology: We no longer have to labor tirelessly to overcome sin and try to please God. In Christ, God has taken away that burden. But any “freedom from” one thing always entails a “freedom for” something else.⁶ As recipients of God’s grace, we are now free to become the people God has already made us to be. Christianity doesn’t tell us to shape up and do better, but it does invite us to look inside—both ourselves and the Bible—to discern what God is calling us to be.

So, let me ask you, using my best Interlocutor voice: What then? Since God has freed us from sin and saved us by grace, shall we then sit back and relax and do nothing?

By no means!

I’ll let David Bartlett take us out with a suggestive interpretation of our “already, but not yet” situation:

We are citizens of no mean country—God’s realm. We belong to no mean family—the family of God. We are graced with no mean gifts—the gifts that God has given us in Jesus Christ. We can be the kind of people we are and stop pretending to be the backbiting grouches we acted like when we got up this morning.⁷

¹ Leander E. Keck, *Romans—Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2005), page 164-165.

² David L. Bartlett, *Romans—Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), page 61.

³ Illustration borrowed from Bartlett, page 61.

⁴ See Keck, page 161.

⁵ Bartlett, page 64.

⁶ Keck, page 172.

⁷ Bartlett, page 66.