

Sixth Sunday after Trinity, July 24, 2022

Readings: *Exodus 20: 1-17, Romans 6: 1-11, Matthew 5: 17-26*

Our Only Hope Is in Christ's Righteousness

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). God demands nothing less than perfection and holiness from you in regard to His commandments (Ex. 20:1–17). Your only hope, then, is not in your own goodness but in the goodness of Christ, who did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them for you. In Christ, your righteousness does indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. For you have been baptized into Christ's death and your sinful nature crucified. Therefore, he who has died has been freed from sin (Rom. 6:1–11). You are now raised with Christ to walk in newness of life and to share in His resurrection on the Last Day. Christ has brought you through the baptismal sea *"out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"* (Ex. 20:2). Therefore, *"consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus"* (Rom. 6:11).

Sermon Transcript:

We begin in the name of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. The text for this morning's message is based upon the Epistle reading from the book of Romans, the 6th chapter. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you know what it's like to live between D-Day and V-Day? To remind those who may have forgotten, D-Day was on January 6, 1944, when the Allied forces, made up of mainly Great Britain, the United States and Canada, invaded Nazi Germany. And V-Day was on May 8, 1945, to mark the formal acceptance by the Allies of World War II of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender. The idea of living between D-Day and V-Day comes from Anthony Hoekema, where he writes, "Jesus Christ has come and, therefore, the decisive victory over our sin, the devil and the flesh has been won. However, the victory is not yet complete." And we live, as Oscar Cullman puts it, between D-Day and V-Day. "Though the enemy has been decisively defeated, there remain pockets of resistance. There are still guerilla troops to be defeated. There are still battles to be fought. In one sense, we already possess salvation. In another sense, we still look forward to our salvation. We already have new life. We do not yet have perfection." And I believe that this is an accurate description of where most of us live, between D-Day and V-Day. We know that Jesus Christ has the power to transform our lives and yet we don't feel transformed. We know that He has the power to forgive our sins, and yet our sins are still very much part of us. We worship Him. We adore Him. We glorify Him. And yet, when we walk out the doors of this building, His power and His purpose seem awfully remote from our lives. That's living between D-Day and V-Day.

St. Paul calls us to a new life in Christ in the 6th chapter of Romans. He calls us to be dead to sin and alive to God. Can you imagine what that might be like? Can you imagine how wonderful life free of sin would be? Someone once said that a good husband is one who isn't worried when he talks in his sleep. That's what a sin-free life is like. There's nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of and nothing we need to apologize for.

Compare that to a life filled with sin. Alexander Whyte, of Free St. George's Edinburgh, used to tell the story about a man who was in a hotel room settling down for the night. And just before he turned out the lights, he heard the most awful groaning and crying coming from the next room. He listened attentively for a while until

he fell asleep. Then, in the morning, just as he's going down to breakfast, he saw two policemen taking the occupant of the adjacent room to prison. Apparently, the groaning and crying, the sobs and the moans from the adjacent room were the agonizing cries of a criminal in the grip of his own conscience.

Have you read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*? Pilgrim was running from the city of destruction and on his back was the guilt of sin, which was weighing him down heavily. The heavy load was making his progress difficult and he wanted to be rid of it. He wanted to be delivered from this sense of guilt. Then, he met Evangelist and Evangelist pointed him towards a wicked gate and said to him, "Go to that gate. Go through that gate. And as you go through that gate, someone will meet you and he'll be able to show you how you can be delivered from the burden of your guilt." I think that some of us need to find that gate and go through it as well. There are those of us who say we trust the Savior, but we are still captive to our sin, to our guilt, to our doubt, to our despair. We are living between D-Day and V-Day. We know in whom we believe, but somehow the victorious life has eluded us. So how can you know this newness of life, about which St. Paul writes?

Dostoevsky once wrote, "Every ant knows the formula of the anthill. Every bee knows the formula of the beehive. They know it in their own way, not in our way. Only humankind does not know its own formula." Is it possible to know the formula for our lives? And, if so, how can we find it? Well, Paul calls our attention, first of all, to our baptism. Our baptism signifies our death to the world and our new life in Jesus Christ. It signifies our membership in the family of God. It signifies our worth as a child of the Father. Just as the ring and the robe and the fatted calf signified that the prodigal son could come home to his father's house, our baptism is a sign and symbol of our worth to God.

Bruce Narramore has put it like this. "It's very clear that man has deeply fallen, but we tend to confuse righteousness and value." You see, according to Scripture, we can be of immense value and worth to God and still be very, very sinful. But sometimes we say, since we are totally depraved or totally sinful, we are therefore worthless. But nothing could be farther from the truth. There's no such thing as a worthless human being. God's grace is always greater than our most regrettable sin. God's power is sufficient for our most obvious weakness. And God's love is more patient than our most persistent rebellion.

We look to our baptism as our first step toward new life in Christ. A few years ago, a small ship left the port on the Gulf of Mexico headed for the northeastern coast of the United States. The ship was small and battered from wear and looked about as sorry as something left over from Admiral Farragut's attack on New Orleans during the Civil War. A group of the captain's friends and onlookers gathered for the embarkation and enjoyed a lot of laughter and ridicule. "You won't get any anywhere in that tub," the crowd yelled out. "Oh, yes, I will," replied the captain, in total confidence. "What makes you think so?" they asked. "I've got a date with the Gulf Stream," he answered. That skipper was a top-notch mariner. He knew the winds and the water. He knew the Gulf Stream. He had a date with a power greater than himself or his little battered boat. He was not sailing under his own wit or the momentum of his engines. He had a date with a power that was greater than himself, but this power was that of the mighty Gulf Stream. Our baptism is a reminder to us that we have access to a power greater than ourselves, the power of the One who has received us has His own.

Well, Paul points us to our baptism. He also points us to Christ's death on our behalf. The Living Bible translates Paul's words like this. "Through His death, the power of your sinful nature was shattered. You died with Him, so to speak, when He died and now you share His new life and shall rise as He did. Your old evil desires were nailed to the cross with Him."

Tom Allen, the famous young preacher in Scotland, was brought to Christ when he heard an African American soldier sing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" He said, "It was neither the song nor the voice, but the spirit in which the soldier sang. Something about his manner, something about his sincerity of expression that convicted him of his sinful life and turned him to his Savior." That has happened to people in every generation who have recognized that the cross of Calvary releases us from the power of sin.

One of the great stories of literature that has been made into a movie and stage productions is that of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. After his parents died, Jean went to live with his sister. After her husband died, the responsibility of being the breadwinner went to Jean, who was 17 at the time. Many times, the family went hungry. Jean once broke through a window and stole a loaf of bread when he was out of work and the children were starving. He was arrested and put in prison. After attempting to escape several times, his sentence was increased. Ultimately, he spent 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. When he was finally released, he found life outside the prison every bit as cruel as the world he had just left. Everyone rejected him. No one trusted him. He went to visit the bishop at the local church. The bishop invited him in, invited him to his table, which was set with the finest silver and treated him with dignity. He gave him a bed for the night, but Valjean woke in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. He was confused by the bishop's kindness. He was tempted to kill his benefactor, but then he decided not to. Instead, he stole the bishop's silver and left the house. He was caught the next morning by the policeman who brought him back to the bishop's home. When the door was opened, the bishop said, "I'm glad you came back. I had intended to give you the candlesticks as well as the silver." Valjean was released, but he left the bishop's house even more confused than before. As he sat thinking about what happened, a child came by and dropped a coin near him. He reached out and covered the coin and the child ran away crying. Later, when he realized what he had done, he tried to find the child and return the money, but he couldn't. But from that time on, a gradual transformation began to take place in his life and Jean Valjean became a respected citizen. He was eventually elected mayor of his village. Then one day, he read about an old man who had been captured in a nearby town and was being accused of that of Jean Valjean who had stolen a coin from a child. After a great struggle in Valjean's soul, he surrendered himself to save the innocent man.

The story of Jean Valjean is a story of a man who was the object of mercy. The mercy, first of all, by the bishop. And he could not forget it. My friends, you and I are objects of mercy ourselves. It's sometimes hard for us to realize this because I fear that the cross has become a cliché for many of us. It has become so familiar that we no longer are touched by its central theme, that the One who created us loves us so much that no price was too great to pay for our salvation.

Look to your baptism. Look to Christ's death on your behalf, but also look to His resurrection, His victory over sin and the grave. "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead," writes St. Paul, "will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death He died, He died to sin once for all, but the life He lives, He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Because Christ lives, we can live also."

That is the good news for today. Christ's resurrection has set us free. Free from guilt, free from despair, free from the darkness and death, free from the slavery of our selfish desires. We can live victorious lives through Him. The battle is over. D-Day has passed and V-Day is here. Look to your baptism, for you are of infinite worth to God. Look to Christ's death upon a cross, for the power of sin over your life has been destroyed forever. And look to His resurrection, for He is alive and we can be truly alive as well. Amen.