Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany (C), January 13, 2019

Romans 6:1-11 (esp. v. 3-4)

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In the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Word of God which engages us this morning is based on Romans 6: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

I say, This water means death to me.

He says, This water means death to me.

I say, By my willing submission, by my acceptable sacrifice, by laying down my life willingly, I take it up again freely, fully under my own control. It may be a submission to just myself, but it is a submission nonetheless, so surely God must have regard for my sacrifice.

He says, By my willing submission, by my acceptable sacrifice, by laying down my life willingly, I entrust all that I am and all that I have into the Father's care. He will have regard for his servant, as he has promised, and he will raise me in due time. I am fully under his control.

I say, I don't want to die.

Jesus says, Not my will, Father, but yours be done.

I say, The only way for me to stay alive is not to die.

He says, The only way for the world to have life is for me to give it mine.

I say, Isn't it enough that this water leaves me *mostly* dead? I am quite willing to be dead to some things: dead to suffering, dead to sorrow, dead to the sins I no longer enjoy. I am willing to be dead to the Law. I am willing to be dead to a faceless, nameless world that never gave me anything anyway. I am willing to be dead to the things of my past that still haunt me, things I regret, things that embarrass me to think of, things that hurt others. There's actually quite a lot that I'm willing to be dead to. Mostly dead. I like that.

He says, It is necessary, John, for the righteousness of God to be fulfilled. Yes, I know what you're saying—I know this water means judgment, wrath, forsakenness, and agony—but no substitutes this time, John. No temporary solutions, no foreshadows, no pretending or sidestepping. You are right: Israel stands under the judgment of God. Chosen and precious Israel has become foul and filthy. She cannot go to meet her Lord. And if *she* cannot, what of the world? Something must be done. It is time. It must be me. I must die.

I say, I am afraid, and I am angry. I am running out of options. Will he really take away my entire life? But I was just beginning to get used to it! Can't he leave me one or two of my favorite… guilty pleasures? Can't I retain just a bit of the ranks of lawlessness I have been gaining? Perhaps I can hide some of them from his sight. Yes, that's what I'll do: I will keep the sins of the mind, and no one will ever know the difference. I will occasionally visit the old, familiar dens of iniquity, and none will be the wiser. I will retrace my old footsteps and pretend that I wandered there accidentally. No one can blame me for that, can they?! I will deceive them all with my "honest mistakes."

He says, I am grieved that I made these miserable creatures. They think they can hide behind fig leaves, but my gaze pierces through. They plot and they scheme, as if to outmaneuver me. Like cockroaches, they scramble away from the light as if their life depended on it. What will it take to save these lost souls from their willing disobedience? I must lay down my life.

I say, Mostly dead describes me better than I thought. Mostly dead, never truly alive. Mostly slave, never truly free. I thought I was so smart. I thought I had it all figured out. I thought I was in control. Baptized in a snorkel, in a desperate attempt to escape death. But it's not mostly wrong, it's all wrong. This thing that I keep safe—this thing that I try to hide even from him—it is no life. Like Sisyphus, this is the boulder I keep elevating, only to chase it down the hill yet again. What have I done? What am I doing?

He says, I will plant myself together with man in his grave. I will die his death, and I will be the death of his death. This shall be my epiphany: God made manifest in man, and life in death.

I say to him, wretched man that I am! Where is life but in you alone? I am a fool, and I am afraid. Take me back to that water that means death to me. Bury me deep within yourself, and take me to the bottom. Let this Me that is not You take not even one more breath. God, save me. God, slay me.

He says to me, it… is… accomplished. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Your death is satisfied in my death. Your life is satisfying in my life.

Dear friends in Christ, the Christian life is not about hiding your sin. It is not about choosing sins that are less obvious, more understandable, or simply mirrors of the culture around you. No, to be a Christian is to be dead to sin; it is to recognize that sin can command you as little as you can command a corpse.

To remember your baptism is to daily die to that which no longer controls you, and instead to arise, your lungs filled with fresh air, your renewed heart pumping new life through your veins, your arms and legs made strong by the Spirit of God. So arise, children of God, buried and raised, and walk in newness of life. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.