

Swimming the Ocean of Grace

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Romans 6:11-23, Psalm 13

I was a late-comer to swimming. It wasn't an issue until mom and I went to "Synod School" at Mo-Ranch. She learned about teaching Sunday School, I learned that non-swimmers had to wear life-preservers in the pool. SO, in that summer before fourth-grade, Mom signed me up for swim lessons at a neighborhood YWCA.

The lessons were VERY important; I was going to Girl Scout Camp for the first time that summer and didn't want to be the "socially awkward" non-swimmer.

People tell me that babies learn to swim easily, but nine-year-olds? Not so much.

I didn't want to put my face in the water. The fear of drowning clawed my gut. I choked down so much water learning "rotary breathing" that I'm sure they had to check the chlorine level in the pool. I beat the water with each stroke, panicked in the deep end, and spent A LOT of time that summer hugging the side of the pool.

I reached summer camp as a "beginner swimmer" but just barely.

But at Camp Whispering Pines everything changed--because someone taught me to float.

In his exploration of this text, professor Israel Kamudzandu, talks about how the "Christ event launched humanity into the ocean of grace."ⁱ

"No one," he writes, "will ever take that away from believers."

We need to hear that as we interpret this passage from Romans. No one can take the ocean of God's grace away from us; however, we believers can beat at the waters, panic in the depths, and spend much of our lives hugging the shore.

Honestly, we might even have trouble hearing this "Word of the Lord" and we would not be alone. Paul argues like a lawyer and a scholar--the language strains our 21st Century American ears and imagination. Our understanding is warped by our country's history of slavery and its modern sign holders who pronounce sinful all those things of which they are not presently guilty.

The text feels almost confrontational with its language about sin and slavery. Paul speaks of sin as if it was alive, as if Sin should be capitalized. Paul implores the Romans and us to take up the grace that has been extended in Jesus Christ and given sign in our baptism.

Yet, for all this rhetoric, the text is not a message of sin and guilt, but of a word of redemption--Paul promises that even capital "S" sin has no dominion over us. We are freed to live as people who "in life and in death belong to God."

I know that in our hearts some of us might quibble with the idea that we have been enslaved by sin.

Rev. Shawnthea Moore takes this up with a modern spin noting: the “slave to fashion” who must follow each season’s trends; the slave to fitness whose relationships must fit the gym schedule; the slave to wealth who is captive to the dictates of Wall Street.

We might even add the slave to entertainment, the slave to achievement, the slave to fear.

Moore adds, “If you want to know who your master is pay attention to what occupies your thoughts and how you spend your time and money. We are all serving something or someone.” She continues, “This passage invites us to ask the question, whom do you serve?”ⁱⁱ

Perhaps even for us, Paul’s talk of freedom might be appealing. After all, who doesn’t want to be free, but we must ask free for what?

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates the passage this way:

“I’m using this freedom language because it’s easy to picture. You can readily recall, can’t you, how at one time the more you did just what you felt like doing—not caring about others, not caring about God—the worse your life became and the less freedom you had? And how much different is it now as you live in God’s freedom, your lives healed and expansive in holiness?

As long as you did what you felt like doing, ignoring God, you didn’t have to bother with right thinking or right living, or right anything for that matter. But do you call that a free life? What did you get out of it? Nothing you’re proud of now. Where did it get you? A dead end.”

Paul shares with the Romans that God frees us from sin so that we may take up lives that are obedient to God. And this is a *good thing!*

In the words of Ted Smith, “This sanctified life is not an obligation placed on us because we have received the gospel. It is itself part of the gift of the gospel. Holiness is what we are made for. It is our deepest need and our highest joy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is Paul, calling us into the ocean of God’s grace and teaching us how to float! Paul, giving us blessed assurance as we learn how to swim.

Do you remember what that was like, learning how to swim?

I remember learning the power of cupping my hands as I pulled them through the water, learning to splash less with my flutter kick, learning to swivel my head instead of lift it. I learned the strokes and the joy that came with the smooth motion of my body in the pool. I learned to love the water and feel almost at home in it.

I still love swimming though I don’t do much of it anymore. It is my favorite Summer Olympic sport. I can’t get enough of the hi-tech suits, technique, and talent that make the competition so fierce. But my favorite moments are watching as the swimmers make those wonderful racing turns, pushing away from the wall like sleek underwater creatures.

I never did master the basic flip turn. Despite being certified as a Life Guard and Water Safety Instructor, I couldn’t get past that older, deeper fear. Despite the swim lessons, there was still struggle, which I think mirrors our lives in the ocean of grace.

I think we struggle between fear and trust as we balance our lives in the world that surrounds us. Certainly, as we pray for the world today, our voices could join those of the Psalmist: “How long, O Lord?”

How long before the war is over, before hunger is ended, before laborers receive a fair wage, before our hearts heal from sadness and loss? How long?

When reading the Psalms--like our call to worship--I am certain that our prayers are too polite, that perhaps our worship is too tame and our sacraments too genteel.

Paul tells us, we’ve been baptized into the death of Jesus and raised with into new life with him. Perhaps you can imagine the visceral feeling—slipping beneath the baptismal waters and then struggling out of them like someone who doesn’t yet know how to swim.

Perhaps you’ve experienced it?

After our baptism, we must learn how to float and then we must learn the rudiments of swimming the ocean of grace. We must learn--over a lifetime--to begin our prayers “How long?” and then to continue them “I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”

If we are to heed the prayer of the psalmist, we know that learning to swim means learning to trust in the grace that holds us even when we are afraid--and perhaps especially then.

Anne Lamott wrote her new book *Stitches* in the aftermath of shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary. She reflected upon how we respond to grace on the bad days. She wondered how we renew our trust in ultimate meaning and purpose in the face of tragedy and loss?

She frames her reflections in the “Christ Event”--our metaphorical ocean of grace.

She writes, “My understanding of incarnation is that we are not served by getting away from the grubbiness of suffering... To heal, it seems we have to stand in the middle of the horror, at the foot of the cross...”^{iv}

So how do we swim, without chopping strokes or panicked gasps, without seeking to cling to our personal shoreline when the bad days come?

Lamott puts it this way:

“most of us have figured out that we have to do what’s in front of us and keep doing it. We clean up beaches after oil spills. We rebuild towns after hurricanes and tornadoes. We return calls and library books. We get people water. Some of us even pray. Every time we choose the good action or response the decent, the valuable, it builds, incrementally, to renewal, resurrection, the place of newness, freedom, justice. The equation is life, death, resurrection, hope”^v

Paul issues the invitation of Christ into renewed belonging and renewed allegiance to the God of grace. He invites us first to float and then to swim the ocean of grace; yet, we are left with a choice each day: we can cling to the broken edges and dead ends of unfettered freedom, or follow the ways of God.

What we choose will demonstrate to whom we belong.

Paul thanked God for the church in Rome; he gave thanks that they have chosen heartfelt obedience to God over the familiarity of their former lives. That thanksgiving comes to us, as we seek to lives of justice and holiness and love, buoyed by each other as we keep learning the strokes.

May God free our hearts to move ever deeper into the waters of grace. Amen.

ⁱ Israel Kamudzandu. *Commentary on Romans 6:12-23*. workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2053

ⁱⁱ Shawnthea Moore. *Pastoral Perspective on Romans 6:12-23*. Feasting on the Word YR A, Vol 3. Louisville: WJK, 2011. 184

ⁱⁱⁱ Ted Smith. *Theological Perspective on Romans 6:12-23*. Feasting on the Word YR A, Vol 3. Louisville: WJK, 2011. 186

^{iv} Anne Lamott. *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope, and Repair*. New York: Riverhead, 2013. 10

^v *Ibid.* 13