



June 21, 2020
The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
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This week I had a memory of my father taking me and my three sisters to a hotel pool. I don't remember why we were there; it possibly could have been for our family reunion or one of his baseball tournaments, but for whatever reason we were there.

And I remember him taking us into this pool, lifting each of each one of us up, lifting us over his head and launching us into the water. And over and over and over again he would launch us into this water, and we laughed and we splashed and we frolicked. It was good.

(I do have another story about me almost drowning in a hotel pool but that's a story for Mother's Day.)

I have another story about another father, a spiritual father, my childhood pastor.

We were standing in our freshly painted gymnasium and the church was dressed in white. My pastor was there, my bishop was there with this white robe with gold piping, and I am standing in a pool of water waist deep. It is cold.

As he is intoning the prayers, someone plugs my nose from behind and I am drug into this cold water. I am immersed and awash in it. I am baptized in it in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

It was holy, it was glorious. It was a kind of death.

That's how Christians understand baptism. It's not just some social rite of passage. It is a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is a death to this world, a death to the effects of sin and death (with a capital "D" perhaps) and a resurrection into a new life where Jesus is Lord and where life is abundant...and where sin and death cannot claim us because it cannot claim Jesus.

This is an important note and it's one that Paul makes to those Christians in Rome in the 1st Century. For this ancient community that was made up of Jews who had accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and Gentile converts, baptism, what happened to them in baptism, made them equal.

This kind of equality stood in stark contrast to the way the world was playing out under the tyranny and the brutality of the Roman Empire. And it was especially brutal to those who did not have the right pedigree.

What they received in baptism, Paul says, is they received a new life with a new Lord.

And so he asked them, "How can you continue in sin as if death were still your lord. How could you continue to live under these old standards that stood to do nothing but oppress and separate people?"

He called it sin.

It begs the question for us today. What exactly is sin? Sin, by its very definition, it breaks fellowship between creation and creature. It's an adventure in missing the point. It drives a wedge between us...each other and the God we want to love.

Sin has a physicality that tries to reduce us to body parts or skin color or nationality or class or education levels or criminal histories and credit scores and medical conditions. And the result of sin is death.

The Bible says that "the wages of sin is death." It kills the humanity within us. It enslaves us to fear of one another and of God.

And racism, its attitude and its actions, whether perpetrated by us in our complicity or internalized by us in self-hatred, racism is a sin.

And speaking of missing the point, yes, racism is only one kind of sin. There are other kinds of sins, but this is the sin we're talking about right now. It's not something we can "bookclub" or legislate away.

We need to be converted. We need to die to it.

Sin affects all of us. It stalks all of us, including our heroes.

Abraham and Sarah, heroes of the faith in that story that we heard from Genesis, they may have thought they were doing the right thing. Even God told Abraham that everything was going to be all right regarding Hagar and Ishmael. God didn't tell them exactly what to do.

So this is what they did. The good Abraham told a slave woman and her child to cross a desert. The only thing he gave them was a skin of water and a loaf of bread. Had God not intervened, Hagar and Ishmael would have perished in that wilderness.

And I just want to pause to say that some of us, all of us, can probably look back over our own lives and pinpoint those moments where somebody meant well but it didn't turn out well and, had not God intervened, we would not be here today.

Thanks be unto God for intervening. Thanks be unto God for not leaving us to our own devices, without leaving us to our own intentions as good as they may be.

Because what the world needs is God.

Because no matter what we do, sin and death are always there, always present, always looking to collect. What we need to fight it is God...with us, as us, fighting for us against sin and death, because it is something that we cannot do.

What humanity needs is Jesus, a true hero.

It needed that hero to engage death and fight...and lose. And death thought it beat him on a hill called Calvary over 2000 years ago. And death gloated until three days later when the God of all creation blew breath back into the lungs of his dead Son.

Death reigned until Jesus Christ got up with all power in his hands. The grave was to be our future, but Jesus satisfied the law's requirements and made true and lasting reconciliation between God and humanity possible.

This is the point that Paul is trying to make to the Romans, that the way to freedom is not legalism and is also not resigning themselves to their lot in life and the Roman social caste system. It is in death, a different kind of death, a dying to the world's expectation of them, of refusing to give death its quarry by choosing to live in the freedom of God's new life and grace in Jesus...by choosing now, having the ability to truly choose, to not love themselves more than they love their neighbors, to not confuse gods constructed with their own hands with the one true and living God...by not loving the law God gave more than the Son God gave.

Paul said to them and to us that the way to freedom is participating in the death of the only person who had ever died and, somehow through the glory of God, had beaten the system, because He yet lives.

And only by spiritually dying in the waters of baptism could we ever have any hope of being finally planted together and overcoming all the things that separate us from loving each other and from loving God.

Notice that when Paul talks to the Romans and to us about spiritual death we experience in baptism, it's past tense. But when he talks about the Resurrection, he uses the future tense.

We have to know and understand that the Resurrection is coming, that sin and death will finally be done away with, but it is not yet. And so for now, being dead will have to be enough. Being dead to sin and its power will have to be enough.

We have to know and understand that racism as a sin is not something that we can ever fully dismantle in this age, but we do know that in the age that has already dawned because of the resurrection in Jesus Christ, racism and sin and death will finally be done away with and we can live in peace.

We'll have to remember that...the next time we renew our baptismal vows, the next time you find yourself immersed in water, the next time you turn on the news and see another story of racial injustice.

Remember that death is not the last word...that Jesus is.