

**WHAT KIND OF FAITH DO WE WANT TO PRACTICE; ROMANS 6:1b-11; JUNE 28, 2020; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Today is the last of a three-part series on What Kind of Country, Church and People Do We Want to be? These sermons were inspired by Marilynne Robinson's recent essay, written before the pandemic, questioning the present direction our nation.

The last two weeks we talked about the economy as a major factor in shaping our attitudes about who we are. We said there's been a huge shift in the distribution of wealth throughout the society as well as a shift in values from a more generous society to a more hardened Darwinian world of survival.

We said the path we are on will lead to deeper division, unrest, turmoil.

Perhaps the major indicator of this growing, widespread disenchantment and disenfranchisement is the makeup of those calling for change.

Today's protest movement as opposed to those of the past, is populated by a broad diversity of race, age, gender, ethnicity, and religion. This is not only a sign of solidarity with black people and the plight of racial oppression that continues to plague the nation but it is a sign of more Americans who feel that their quality of life and 'pursuit of happiness' has been gravely threatened if not taken away altogether.

The fact that many of those joining in protest are millennials and the next younger generation reflects the simmering frustration of people who were born into a 9/11 world of terror, lived through the longest war in our history, who've witnessed routine mass gun killings and a cynical political system that has failed to do anything to prevent more mass murders, and these are people who, if they got to college, graduated—many of them—with paralyzing debt and a job market that offers little if any hope to recover to a life free of financial worry.

Robinson puts it this way: "the present crises have exposed crimes and injustices deeply embedded in the society we live in now. So we provide our descendants with a weighty burden of guilt to lament....all of this comes down to the need to recover and sharpen a functioning sense of justice based on a reverent appreciation of humankind all together and one by one...The authenticity of our understanding must be demonstrated in our attempting to *act justly even at steep cost to ourselves.*"

But how do we do that? How do we act justly even at a steep cost to ourselves? Today's reading from Romans has the perfect answer and depicts the kind of people I suspect we long to be to make this a better world. Paul's answer is: "Good news!! We are already the people we need to be." "But," of course, there's always a 'but' because this world isn't heaven and we aren't angels. "But," Paul says, "we aren't there just yet."

Today's lesson is about baptism. Paul's language is bigger and bolder than our sprinkling baptism...but not the theology in which we baptize. Those who have been baptized have been put to death. In Paul's day, converts to the faith were totally immersed, dunked completely, full body, down under water. Drowned. Put to death. And what was put to death was the old life. The old me. All the things that held me back from being my best, from allowing the image of God in which I am made and which is imprinted on my heart from ruling my life.

And, when the new Christian is pulled up out of the water she is brought to life in Christ, life in this image in which we are made, God's image, that frees us from all the old stuff and enables us to be Christs to the world.

This is what Christ did for us. He died and was raised. The power of the old life was put away forever in his willingness to show with his life how far God's love goes—far enough to give itself away even for one's enemies, even for Pilate, the chief priests and the crowd calling for his death.

Luther said that baptism takes only a few moments to do but a lifetime to finish. He said Paul is teaching the Romans this death-to-life process that's at the heart of baptism long after they were baptized; it's a reminder that God is not finished with us on the day of our baptism. Baptism is the *beginning* of the journey, not the destination. *Daily* we must die. *Daily* the Holy Spirit must pry our hands off those things to which we so tightly cling. *Daily* we must let go of the side of the pool and venture into deeper waters. *Daily* we learn to let go and let God.

The clue that the Roman's don't have a clue is the question Paul is met with at the start of chapter 6. Some people were suggesting that since God is so into forgiving us, since forgiving is God's job, then shouldn't we give God more opportunities to forgive? Let's sin more so that God can forgive more. I can only imagine Paul's face upon hearing this twisted logic. It's a comment you'd expect from Doug Hefernan in "King of Queens" for whom when he is in the kitchen and rooting through the cupboards or has his head stuck in the refrigerator rummaging for something to eat, no other subject is worthy of discussion or even bringing up. He is the embodiment of gluttony not just for food but for self-gratification.

Paul is saying (in my free translation of the Greek), "Look, you knuckleheads, to even ask that question—should we sin more?—reveals that you have more dying to do."

How do we die? How do we let go? How do we stop looking out for just ourselves and our kind? A colleague told me of a member of his congregation who was terrified of being alone. When her husband was traveling she'd have a friend stay over, never would she allow herself to be alone.

Then that all changed, my colleague asked what made it okay for her to be alone. She said it happened when her daughter died of leukemia. Once you've suffered great loss it feels like you've lost yourself, she said.

There's nothing more to be afraid of. It's the fear of death that causes us to cling to life. The irony is that our clinging to our children or possessions or some far-fetched dream doesn't give life, it reduces it. Our clinging is a fear of death. We try to stave it off with accomplishments or 'things' or wealth or finally big granite markers with our names on them.

But it's in letting go that we find life. Letting go as Christ let go and let God take it from his arrest and trial to his execution. You see he was free from the fear of death because he knew that in his death he would be safe in God's love.

This is why it's a life-long process of living into our baptism. The clinging never stops we just need to get better at prying our hands off of whatever it is we are clinging to. And it's possible to get better at letting go so that at our own moment of death we can let ourselves go into the mystery and promise of God's love.

Let me bring this back to what kind of world and church we want. The more uncertain the world grows—from the environment to the economy, from our national security to our job security, from our safety and wellbeing to our children's safety and wellbeing white people, people in positions of power and authority tend to cling harder to privilege.

I am not saying every white person, I am saying that's the policy trend that has predominated and prevented the social change and justice we need. And it wouldn't be possible without *a lot of people*, and I don't mean just supporters of the present administration, who cling for dear life to privilege. This past week NPR did a report on the Kerner Commission appointed by LBJ. The report was an attempt to find the causes of the 1967 race riots. The commission proposed a two-pronged approach to ensure racial equity and justice and prevent further rioting: modernize policing and invest in communities and people.

LBJ shelved the report. He didn't even thank the members of the committee. The path he and his successor Richard Nixon and nearly every president since took was the law and order approach to managing racial tensions by imprisoning black men. Senator Fred Harris who is the last surviving member of the commission said that the assumption that we can be an affluent society and permit racial and social injustice to continue will lead to more and worse riots. White people will have to give something up he said, echoing Marilynne Robinson's "steep cost" for broad societal reconciliation to occur.

In other words, the clinging has to stop. The death grip on privilege that leads to better education, health care, job opportunity, and wealth accumulation for a group of people privileged because of the color of their skin has to end. Everybody does better when everybody does better Harris said. Right now everybody *is not* doing better—especially blacks—but even whites would do better if blacks did better. That's the conclusion of our own Community Foundation of WNY Racial Equity Round Table—we will be a better community in every way—economically and ethically when the gaps are eliminated between the quality of life for African Americans and white people.

What it gets down to is being free to love our neighbor as ourselves doesn't it! Freed by the liberating waters of baptism to trust more and more that our safety and well-being does not ultimately depend on what we accomplish or accumulate but on God's love and care for us in this life and in the life to come.

Anxiety and fear are toxic to our relationships, our faith, our value system and actions. Anxiety and fear, rooted as we said last week in a belief in scarcity that there isn't enough to go around, will kill a nation, a church, a family, a person. Trust, stepping out in faith, not knowing what the outcome may be but knowing that whatever it is God will be with us and never abandon us makes it possible to let go of the death grip we white folks have on privilege.

There's our homework. What are we clinging to for fear of losing, for fear of having to give up, to go without. That's the barrier between us and the life God wants so desperately for us to inherit and embrace. It's like going off the high dive, taking the leap of faith, jumping into the waiting arms and ever-lasting love of God. Amen.