

**June 28, 2020  
Christ the Servant,  
Pentecost 4  
Romans 6:12-23**

**It is always interesting to me when abstract theology and practical ministry come together. This happened before my eyes in an explosive way some years ago when I was on the board of directors for a nursing home in Ohio. It was a time when living wills were coming into vogue and family members were making decisions in helping a loved one die a natural death and not be kept alive with tubes and breathing machines. The question the nursing home faced was this: What would the response be if a family, holding a legal living will, asked that a feeding tube be removed from a loved one?**

**It was a very sensitive question. To the family, it was a loving thing to do to help mom not to suffer on a prolonged basis. To some on the nursing staff, though, it was the same thing as starving a person to death. What to do?!**

**We decided to gather nurses, nursing aides (who would have the hands-on bedside care), family members who had a loved one in an end-of-life situation, and board members who wanted to discuss the issue. This *sounded* like a good idea – in theory. In practice it turned out to be a disaster. We had, on the board, a Lutheran pastor who knew much more about theology than he did about pastoral care or, for that matter, common sense.**

**In the room were family members whose mother or grandmother suffered from late-stage Alzheimer's disease. Staff members were present who experienced death and dying on a daily basis. The administrator opened the forum by giving what I thought was an excellent and sensitive summary of the issues and the decisions that needed to be made. She said death was never easy –**

for the resident, the family members, or the staff. Then she opened the floor for discussion.

There was a long awkward silence which was finally broken by the Lutheran minister who said this in his stained glass voice: “Whenever we talk about death we need to ask where death comes from and why it exists. The Bible tells us that death is the result of sin.” He went on to explain what he meant, but nobody was listening beyond that. They only heard, “Death is the result of sin.” Family member were asking, “What did grandma do?” Nursing aides were just plain repulsed by the statement. Their residents died because of Alzheimer’s disease, pneumonia, and strokes – not sin. The administrator wanted to strangle the pastor.

Now, the pastor was only relating what St. Paul wrote in Romans. We heard it this morning. Paul is admonishing the church in Rome to quit being slaves of sin because, “the end of those things is death.” Then Paul says something I used to see quoted on roadside billboards: “The wages of sin is death.”

You can bet that the people in the nursing home that day needed some biblical interpretation, and quick! We do, too! What on earth does this really mean? Does it mean that you die if you do bad things? You drink too much you get cirrhosis of the liver and die. Smoke too much and you get lung cancer and die. It reminds me of the cartoon I saw recently where the guy with the big beer belly sat on the table in the exam room while the doctor said to him, “You have two choices. You can experience an exercise room for one hour per day or you can experience death for twenty-four hours per day.”

Is that what St. Paul meant when he said, “The wages of sin is death?” Well, maybe ... in part ... sometimes. But I give Paul more credit than that. That view of the relationship between sin and death is what is known as the

“moral view.” Moral failings cause life to cease. Paul probably believed that. But he had a bigger understanding of sin. Paul also probably thought of it in the way Augustine would come to define it in later generations. This is what is known as the “religious view” of the relationship between sin and death. That theory goes this way: Adam and Eve could have lived forever. They sinned. Therefore, they died. And we have been dying ever since because we live under their original sin.

I’ll share something with you: I’m not sure either the moral view *or* the religious view sound adequate to modern ears. We filter these things through common sense and reason. While it may be true that, in many cases, immoral living causes death, it is *also* true that “good” people who never do “bad” things also get lung cancer or die of strokes. And, we ask, why should *I* die because Adam and Eve sinned? What does *that* say about a God who would let *that* go on?

Well, unlike the pastor that day in the nursing home board room, St. Paul probably thought first in terms of pastoral care than in systematic theology. He was writing a letter to a specific group of people in a particular place in a particular time in history – the Christians in Rome who were asking questions you and I ask: Why do we suffer? Why aren’t things right with the world? Why aren’t things right with me?

Paul was writing a letter to a people who were hurting. And he sought to address the hurt by holding up to them the relationship between grace and life. So, in order to highlight grace and life, Paul needed to contrast it with sin and death. So he gave them a *before* and *after*.

*Before*, he told them, the thing that held your community and your relationship to God together was your adherence to law ... following rules and regulations. Your reward for that, he says, was righteousness. What pious and

righteous people you were. But *now*, because of what God did on the cross through his son, Jesus, you are forgiven and justified by God's grace – not because you deserve it, but because God loves you and wants to make things right with you. This grace is now the thing that holds your community and your relationship to God together. Paul says this is its own reward and you will grow in it eternally. Paul would have also understood sin the way St. John understood it: as unbelief, or as a refusal to live out the purpose God gave to his children.

I wonder if we might think of sin that way – as a refusal to live out the purpose God put before us – and not just us individually, but “us” as the groups, schools, businesses, or systems of which we are apart. These entities, too, are called upon to love the unlovable, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and give cups of cold water to society's *least*. When huge corporations systematically do not give women equal pay for equal work and do not provide equal opportunities for advancement, it is a sin and its wages is the death of justice and equality. Systemic racism is a sin the wages of which can be literal death as we have seen in case after case of black men being singled out for jogging while black or bird watching while black ... literal death when law enforcement puts a knee on a neck for more than eight minutes or a life-ending choke hold.

When you and I were baptized we became different people. That is, we were given forgiveness and new life. I'm not sure I, St. Paul, or anyone can ever explain why there is suffering and death in the world. But I think I can proclaim the relationship between grace and life. God has given us life. She gives us new life each day. And at the end of the days God gives us eternal life. But God has given us a command to live together as community, reaching out to our brothers and sisters in every way we can. When we fail to live that way it is a sin. And the wages of that sin is death.