

The 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Matthew 10:40-42; Romans 6:12-23

Genesis 22:1-14 is one of the most shocking, troubling and yet admired stories in the Bible – Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Again, this story cannot be understood except from the Hebrew perspective on birthright (see commentary on Genesis 21:8-21). To the Hebrews, the concept of birthright underlay the primary structure of their society. The transfer of authority and power from one generation to the next, the transfer of wealth, religious leadership and of their Law was through the device of birthright. All inheritance within the Hebrew system passed from father to the eldest son. That son received all the authority his father had enjoyed, made all decisions regarding the future of that family, controlled the family’s wealth, received preferential treatment not only from within the family but by all in the clan and tribe, and was even the spiritual leader of the family.

But God had made an unbreakable covenant with Abraham to pass that birthright through the only son of Abraham and his wife, Sarah – Isaac. Yet Isaac was not Abraham’s eldest son. Ishmael was! Ishmael – the son of Abraham and Sarah’s slave, Hagar – was the legitimate eldest son through whom the birthright was to be passed. But Genesis 21:8-21 tells the story of how Sarah had plotted to usurp Ishmael’s right, and had succeeded in doing so by having Abraham banish the boy and his mother and, by so doing, declaring him no longer his son. Thus, Isaac now inherited the place of the eldest son – the one through whom God “would make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted” (Gen. 13:16), the one through whom “all the nations of the earth would be blessed” (12:2-3).

But now comes the most improbable story. The way for Isaac to be *the* progenitor of Israel had been established. The future of the covenant made between God and Abraham for that nation to emerge that would become the way through which all nations could be blessed seemed secured. And then God acted in what seemed to be the most illogical way – a way that jeopardized everything! God commanded, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (22:2). And with that command, God’s divine effort to redeem humanity was put in peril!

God is the God of the unexpected! We, as human beings, want to always operate out of the perspective, “Come weal or come woe, our status is quo”! We don’t like unexpected change. We don’t like to be threatened with the unknown. Abraham and Sarah had it all figured out – that Isaac would be the recipient of the birthright, that he would succeed his father as patriarch of the clan, that God’s covenant with Abraham for the land, the nation and the people would pass through Isaac as son. And then God threatens all of that tidy world with the horrifying words, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering”!

The words God uses are particularly poignant – “your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love”. This is no ordinary child. This is Abraham’s son. This is Abraham’s only son – his unique son, his singular son. And this is the son that Abraham loves with all his heart. And now, Abraham

is being commanded to offer this son who is the apple of his eye as a burnt sacrifice to God! The words are purposely chosen to stress the horrifying nature of this command and the poignancy of this moment!

Put to the test, what will Abraham do? What Abraham does – and what Isaac as his faithful son does – is expressed in the most intriguing terms of openness and vulnerability. “God said to him, “Abraham”! And he said, “Here I am” (vs. 1). The words, “Here I am” are used three times in this story, knitting this story together into one coherent whole. When faced with God’s initial challenge, Abraham’s attitude is an open-handed “Here I am”. When Isaac – unaware that he was to be the sacrifice -- asked his father where the sacrificial animal was, Abraham replied, “Here I am” (vs. 7). When, finally, God intervenes to keep Abraham from killing his son, Abraham replies, “Here I am” (vs. 11). This is the response of Abraham that typifies his whole character – being totally transparent before God and open to God’s leading. “Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no guile” (John 1:47)!

The command is to offer Isaac “as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (22:2). This is the only instance in scripture in which God demands human sacrifice. In Judges 11, the only other biblical record of human sacrifice to Yahweh, God did not demand it. So why does God demand it here?

It is clear from the very way this story is told that God has no intention of allowing Isaac to be killed. In this story, God is not in the least way interested in human sacrifice. The purpose of the demand is to see how deeply Abraham’s trust in God truly lies. It is a test as powerful and as eternally significant as is the test of Job (Job 1-3). Would Abraham accept the command to sacrifice his son, and act upon it? Would he proceed over several days journey to Moriah, there to proceed with the preparations for the sacrifice? And would he do so while still holding steadfastly to the promise “through Isaac that your offspring shall be named for you” (21:12)? What was the extent of Abraham’s faith? To what degree did “Abraham believe God and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6)?

We do not know what was going on in Abraham’s mind (although likely confusion was a strong part of it). But he did know what God had promised, and Abraham was committed to taking God at God’s word. How God would resolve this dilemma, Abraham did not know (the New Testament writer of Hebrews suggests that Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead: Hebrews 11:19). But God would act, because God had promised. And God would be faithful to that promise!

The curious player in this entire scenario was Isaac. He, of course, simply thought that his father and he were traveling to a holy mountain to sacrifice to God. It had never dawned on him that *he* would be the sacrifice! He even asks in all innocence, “Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” And he seems to accept in blind faith his father’s response, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (vss. 7-8). But what did he think when Abraham “bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (vss. 9-10)? By this time, it should have dawned on Isaac that he was the sacrifice, and he must have lain there in horror (in

fact, one can only wonder at the trauma this incident must have had upon Isaac). But there is no indication from the scripture about Isaac's reaction to this whole incident.

God stays the execution! The "God-who-had-no-name" provided a ram for sacrifice, Isaac was released and restored to his father. And because of Abraham's obedience and faith, God once again confirmed the covenant made between God and Abraham with the words, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (vss. 16-18).

The covenant between Abraham and God is best understood as a reflection of the Israelites' understanding of the importance of their agreement with God made 800 years later at Mt. Sinai. That Sinai Covenant held the nation of Israel together and gave it its reason for existence. The Israelites could take assurance that the covenant made between Moses and God was no light matter, for God had bound himself as irrevocably to Israel as he had to Abraham. The Israelites were guaranteed the land of Canaan, and they were set apart to become a great blessing to all the peoples of the world. This was the unbelievable covenant made between Israel and God that was foreshadowed in Abraham's willingness to take God at God's word, and obey him.

By telling the story of the sacrifice of Isaac thousands of years after that incident, the Israelites reminded themselves of the response which God would expect, not only from Abraham but from God's people down through the millennia. As God demanded unswerving obedience from Abraham – no matter how impossible the demand might seem – so God would demand of Israel commitment to the covenant made at Sinai. Obedience to God's call was the inevitable outcome to the covenant made between God and God's people. And that was not only true of Abraham and Isaac. Nor was it only true of the children of Isaac who 800 years later stood with Moses at Mount Sinai. That obedience to God's call is equally expected of God's people who name the name of God's son three thousand years later as it was for Abraham walking with his son to the land of Moriah to "offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains" (Gen. 22:2)!

Psalm 13 is a classic lament. It is built around both complaint and praise. Although we don't know who wrote the psalm or what the occasion is for its writing, it is clear that the psalmist begins the psalm beside himself with despair. But by its end, he has moved beyond that anguish to that of trust in God and, consequently, praise. It is possible that the author is writing about his own approaching death – if one takes literally the phrase in this psalm, "Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death" (vs. 3). But that is possibly only a metaphorical statement, not literal death.

The psalm divides into three parts. The first section is of verses 1-2, in which the psalmist's anguish is articulated. Second, verses 3-4 is the psalmist's petition and prayer to God. The third part is verses 5-6, in which the tension of the psalm is resolved in the psalmist's expression of trust in and praise of God.

The psalmist begins the psalm with four pithy, direct complaints – all of them built around the emphasis, “How long does this condition have to continue, God? How long must this go on?” It is a sentiment with which all of us can concur. “How long, O Lord, will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”

But operating out of such a complaint is a futile experience. There is no answer to such a complaint. For all it does is cause the one complaining to wallow in one’s own sorrow. The psalmist realizes this, and quickly extricates himself from such a dilemma.

“Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’. My foes will rejoice because I am shaken” (vss. 3-4). The psalmist moves from complaint to demand, from “Ain’t it awful” to “What is to be done?” And what is to be done, the psalmist realizes, needs to primarily be God’s action. God must act both on the psalmist’s behalf and through the psalmist to confront and deal with these issues.

The psalm then ends with the psalmist’s declaration of trust and praise in God. “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me” (vss. 5-6). It is intriguing to note the change in tenses in these two verses. It moves from past to future tense, recognizing that the task of the psalmist in such an impossible situation as this writer here faces is to trust in God’s “steadfast (i.e., *chesedh* or covenantal) love that was executed in the past (at the first Passover, the Red Sea and the making of covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai), and continues to be lived out in Israel’s present. And if the psalmist so trusts, then God will “deal bountifully with me” so that “I will sing to the Lord!”

Matthew 10:40-42 states, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly, I tell you, none of these will lose their reward”.

This passage is rich with meaning, and we will exegete that meaning in a few more paragraphs. But before we do, we need to recognize that this message on reward cannot be separated from the previous passage on the price of being faithful to Jesus Christ (see commentary on Matthew 10:32-39 for the 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time). This earlier passage stressed Jesus’ teaching that the Christian way of life is the way of the cross! If one authentically follows Christ, then he or she must become an advocate for a way of life that is directly in opposition to the way of the Empire.

As followers of the Christ, we are those who embrace the deepest, most trusting relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters in the faith; we are, by the very act of being Christians, a part of a relational culture. As followers of the Christ, we Christians are – by the very definition of being Christians (*Christ-ones*) – committed to the poor, willing to share our wealth so that all

live equitably, and committed to compensatory justice for all those who are marginalized, oppressed or exploited by life. Living with such priorities consequently means that it is inevitable that we will be engaged in conflict with the world. There is no way around this inevitability. It is inevitable, if we are faithful to our calling of following Jesus, that we will be rejected and hated by those systems, structures and people who have given themselves over to a society that rewards them for acting greedily, seeking to accumulate power and to dominate those who are different than they are.

So, Jesus teaches in the paragraph that precedes today's lesson, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (10:38-39). To follow Jesus is to opt for a cross! Do not trivialize this symbol of a cross into suggesting that it is a burden we might bear ("Well, I just have to bear my cross") or an inconvenience we face; particularly, do not trivialize it into a piece of jewelry we wear! The cross means rejection. It means shame and humiliation. It means pain, violence and marginalization. The cross was the way the Roman Empire dealt with those who were the greatest threat to the continuing dominance and control of the empire! It was reserved for criminals, traitors against the state and insurrectionists! So to "take up the cross" was to take up rebellion against the state! It was to identify with those who most threatened the empire. And nothing threatened the empire more than this man Jesus and his followers whose very presence, beliefs and actions undermined the premises of political, economic and religious power upon which the Roman Empire was built!

It is in this light that one must now read the Gospel lesson for today. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me". But who welcomes a Christian leader? Only someone who is equally committed to rebellion against Rome. Who welcomes a Christian apostle or teacher than one who also identifies with the teachings and actions of this "Son of Man" from Galilee who was advocating a way of life directly oppositional to Roman and Jewish standards of order, distribution of wealth and primary values. And that made the one who would welcome a teacher or preacher as guilty as an apostle. And that made that teacher as guilty as an apostle himself. And that made the apostle as guilty as the primary source of this rebellion against the state – Jesus of Nazareth!

So, "whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward" (vss. 41-42).

But what is a prophet's reward? What is a righteous person's reward? What is a "little one's" reward? The author of Hebrews states their reward: "These were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:35b-38a). Our reward for faithfulness to working for political justice, economic equity, the liberation of the poor, and building a relational culture is the reward of persecution by those people and the world's systems that prize unilateral power,

greed and domination. This is the reward Jesus can promise us who would truly follow him! But it is this way that leads to life!

There are several truly intriguing nuances in this passage. First, Jesus names three kinds of disciples who both follow him and whom the Empire should learn to fear. They are the prophet, the righteous and the little ones. To whom is he referring?

A prophet is one who proclaims the Word of God to king and commoner alike. He or she is the one who announces “Thus says the Lord” to the establishment. The prophet speaks truth to power; she or he calls the political, economic and religious hierarchy to accountability. But the prophet also proclaims God’s promises to both the systems and to the people. He or she presents a vision of the world as God intended it to be, and seeks to awaken within each person the longing to pursue such a world rather than to pursue one’s own aggrandizement. Therefore, the prophet is one who *speaks* God’s word.

The term, “a righteous person” deserves our particular attention, simply because it was a Hebrew idea totally foreign to Western thinking. In fact, to translate the Hebrew word *tsaddiq* with the English word, “righteous”, is to guarantee misunderstanding (the word means “righteous” but what Jews meant by “righteous” is not what the word “righteous” means in English). But when Jesus used it in this context, everyone who heard it immediately understood what Jesus was saying (simply because they were all Hebrews and thus thought like Hebrews).

The English word “righteous” means “to act in accordance with divine or moral law”, “acting morally right”. It comes from the Middle English, “right-wise”. The Hebrew concept of righteousness, however, is closer to the slang use of the word (e.g., “He’s a righteous dude”, which means “genuine”).

The Hebrew concept of righteousness has to do exclusively with relationships between people (“he’s genuine with people”), not concurrence with the law. To an Old Testament or New Testament Jew, “righteousness” had to do with the authentic and just living out of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship was with other people, a community, a system or with God. Each person exists within a set of relationships, the Hebrews believed, and he is defined and his life ordered by those relationships. It might be the relationship of a husband to a wife, a mother to her children, a business owner to her employees, a successful landholder to the “poor outside his gates”, a commoner to his king, a rabbi to his parishioners, a villager to her village, a priest to his worshippers, a community to its resident foreigners, a people to their God. To a Jew, all of life was relationship and was defined in terms of a spectrum of relationships, because one human being might be, at one and the same time, husband, father, business owner, landholder, commoner, parishioner, villager, worshipper, a “home-boy” and one who embraced relationship with God. To be “righteous”, therefore, was to be living in such a way that one was in “right-relationship” with all these people all the time. Of course, this was impossible. But this was the goal in life. The goal was not success or power or influence or fame, or even to be well-thought-of and held in respect. The goal was to be “righteous” – that is, the consistent filling of the demands that each relationship lays upon a person!

Therefore, what did Jesus mean when he said, “Whoever welcomes a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous” (vs. 41b)? The righteous Christian, by definition, was a person who was serious and intentional about practicing God’s word in the entirety of his life. She was one who sought to live by “doing justice, loving mercifully and walking humbly with God”; he was one who sought the best for each person with whom he came in contact, sought to distribute his wealth so that all around him could be as freed from poverty as possible, and who sought the most humble and intimate relationship with God and with his neighbors. And what Jesus was saying was that when one welcomed such a righteous person into his house (even though the spiritual standards that made this person “righteous” were standards directly opposable to the priorities of the Roman Empire and the Jewish Sanhedrin), then that host would be “infected” by such a person and would be motivated to follow that person’s example – thus receiving “the reward” of righteousness!

Therefore, if a prophet is one who *speaks* God’s word, then the “righteous person” is one who *acts* God’s word. If the prophet calls all people and systems to justice, equity, and caring relationships, the righteous person acts out such relationships through her deeds and is therefore example to us of how we ought to live as followers of the Christ.

The third kind of disciple who both follows Jesus and whom the Empire should learn to fear is “the little ones”. Jesus said in today’s Gospel lesson, “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward” (vs. 42). But who is a “little one”? And what does Jesus mean by this term?

“Little ones” was a favorite expression of Jesus, used frequently in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Matt. 18:6, 10, 14; Mark 9:42; Luke 12:32; 17:2). Jesus taught that it was the responsibility of Christians and of the Christian community to protect, advocate for and to work for the empowerment of the “little people” of Jewish society – the “expendables”. The expendable class was the most feared of all of Jewish society’s divisions, not because they were so powerful but because they were most intimidating. They intimidated by their very presence, for they were a reminder to every Jewish peasant of how vulnerable they actually were.

Very few were born into the expendable class; most “fell” into it because of a severe drought or the accumulation of indebtedness or sustained illness or unemployment. And if it could happen to them, it could happen to you, as well. The expendables were itinerant day laborers, beggars, bandits, shepherds, widows, orphans and the leprous and unclean. These were the “little ones” who were avoided by the Israelite peasants of Jesus’ day. And what Jesus demanded was that it was the obligation of all his followers, not to avoid these expendables, but to welcome them, encourage them, advocate for them, seek to empower them, and to treat them “righteously”. In fact, most of those whom Jesus fed and most whom he healed were the “little ones” – so Jesus lived out what he taught!

In this passage, Jesus does something rather intriguing. He states “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones”. Why he said this is beautifully suggested by the great biblical scholar, Jerome (c. 347-420), when he wrote, “Someone may say, “I am prevented by poverty from acting as a host.” Jesus eliminated this excuse, too, by the easily fulfilled command that we should offer a cup of cold water with our whole heart. He said “cold water”

rather than “hot water” so that we could not object because of our poverty or lack of fuel for hot water”.¹ Thus, Jerome reminds us that no matter who we are, whether we are a prophet, a “righteous” person, an ordinary Christian or the least of the least, each of us can choose to act in the service of others.

So if a prophet is one who *speaks* God’s word and the “righteous” person is one who *acts out* God’s word, then the “little one” *lives* God’s word, simply being in her life and in her relationship with all people the kind of disciple that symbolizes what it means to live as “Christ-ones” by acting justly, sharing the little that one has, treating each other with love and living life embracing God and all people! And if the leaders of the Empire have any sense at all, they will know to fear such people, for those people stand for everything the Empire stands over against in its lust for power, its commitment to corner the wealth and to dominate all the world. For these people will be the continuing radicals of the kingdom who call the peoples and the nations to other values than the Empire’s values, and thus undermine all that the Empire stands for!

A second intriguing nuance in this passage is the unusual use of the term “in the name of “. Jesus stated, “Whoever welcomes a prophet *in the name of* a prophet”, and again “Whoever welcomes a righteous person *in the name of* a righteous person”, and finally “Whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones *in the name of* a disciple”. What does Jesus mean by the phrase “in the name of”?

The name of someone in Biblical times was of utmost importance. To us, a name is nothing more than a means of identification; a man could just as easily be named “James” or “Andrew” as much as “Robert” or “John”. Of course, one’s surname is inherited. But unless one’s given name is the same as a forebear, its selection is simply a matter of personal preference of those who name the person. But in Hebrew culture it was quite different. The name of a person was to capture the very essence of that person, and would describe the nature of that person. Thus, Jesus could not have been named any other name than Jesus, because the name means “God saves”, and Jesus was the savior! Likewise, the name “Simon” meant “hearing”. But since Simon was to become the human foundation upon which the church would be built; Jesus had to change Simon’s name to Peter (“the bedrock”) so that his name matched his vocation! And Judas meant “the betrayer”! In Hebrew typology, the name described the person’s personality or lifework!

Therefore, for Jesus to say that if one provided hospitality “in the name of a prophet”, that “name” (or vocation) transferred over to the host so that he or she became prophetic. If one cared for “a righteous man”, he or she became more righteous in their lifestyle. If one cared for “little ones” “in the name of a disciple”, one became a more committed disciple of Jesus Christ. The reward for blessing those who were being used by God to work for the subversion of the Roman Empire “in the name of” God’s Empire of justice, equity and relationship, was to be blessed in the same way you blessed! You inherited some of the characteristics of those for whom you provided both hospitality and protection in a threatening world.

What Jesus is essentially saying in the Gospel lesson for today, therefore, is that he has created the Church to be community, a community that stands together, supports one another,

¹ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew I*, 10:40-42.

encourages the work of one another, and lives for one another as all – prophet, righteous person, disciple or little one – work together for the advancement of God’s Empire in a world currently dominated by the Roman (Evil) Empire. The mission is that of hospitality, of caring for and supporting each other in your common mission. To be faithful to this mission means the likelihood of persecution, prosecution, cross and alienation stretching from family to empire. But all of us who name the strong name of Jesus Christ are God’s family, working together for the advancement of God’s kingdom from the greatest of us (“prophet”, “righteous one”, “disciple”) to the least of us (“little ones”). Dale Bruner summarizes the import of today’s Gospel lesson with the following words.

“The Christian mission is a blessing-bringing thing, and those who carry the mission and those who give hospitality to its carriers should know that the Father watches rewardingly. The Christian world mission is God’s major enterprise in history, and all who work to advance it, directly or indirectly, with sermons or with cups of cold water, with home visitations or financial assistance, are in line for substantial rewards. Not a single disciple is left out of the mission: some do it, and other support it – all receive the same great reward – divine appreciation at the judgment”!²

Romans 6:12-23 continues Paul’s defense of the doctrine of justification by faith. Paul’s core belief is under attack because if one holds to it, such a belief strikes at the very heart of both a Jewish and a pagan understanding of salvation. Jews would tend to believe that salvation is based upon our obedience of the Law of Moses. Gentiles would believe that salvation is based upon one’s good works which would outweigh one’s evil deeds. In both cases, salvation would depend upon one’s self. It is our keeping of the Law, and our obedience to all its regulations, that makes us right with God. Or it is our performing good deeds that make us right with God. With either approach, our salvation depends upon our actions.

But what Paul is proclaiming is absolutely revolutionary. Through his doctrine of justification by faith, he is teaching that God through Christ has already done everything that is necessary for our salvation. It is God who has acted through the death and resurrection of his son that has purchased our salvation. God has already acted to make us acceptable. There is nothing we can do (obeying the Law, doing good deeds) to make ourselves more acceptable to God than we already are because of the cross. All that we can do is to simply accept that we are accepted. It is to acquiesce to God’s act to redeem us.

The reason that human beings gravitate toward a solution to our sinfulness that is built either on obeying the Law or doing good deeds is that either approach places the control of our spiritual destiny in our own hands! To accept that God has already done all that is necessary for our salvation is to surrender that control. Our estate doesn’t depend upon us, but upon the good graces of God. And we can’t control those good graces. And therefore we can’t control God!

In other words, the problem is a problem of power. We want the power! We want to have unilateral power over God, just as we want unilateral power over other humans and even over the

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p. 497.

entirety of society. And acknowledging that our salvation depends upon God's actions and not our own is the ultimate surrender of unilateral power. We are no longer in control. And we would rather control God than to have God love us! We want God on our own terms! That's why, even today, people will oppose Paul's doctrine of the grace of God as sufficient for our salvation.

In last Sunday's Epistle Lesson, we examined Paul's rebuttal to one objection to Paul's belief in the saving grace of God. He wrote, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means" (6:1b)! It is a mocking and even insulting argument. Reducing Paul's argument to absurdity, his opponents declare, "If grace is the way God saves, then why shouldn't we sin to excess, because the more we sin, the more opportunity we give God to forgive such sin!" Paul's "by no means" is a shocked and scandalized response to that thought, comparable to "God forbid" or "No way"! Paul argues against this assertion by reminding the reader that salvation is a process, not a product. Although salvation starts with a person's embracing in response God's embrace of him ("justification"), it is a continuing process in our lives as we become more like Christ, as Christ is "formed in you" (cf., Gal. 4:19). To such a person who is being formed in Christ, the very thought of committing sin in order to activate grace is reprehensible. It is a nauseating thought, for one's desire is to avoid sin (because it is displeasing to God), not wallow in it!

Today's Epistle Lesson moves on to a second argument that critics of the doctrine of the grace of God would make to oppose it. "Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means" (6:15)! Paul again declares, "No way!" Does not grace cancel moral obligation? If God embraces us, does that not mean that we are given license to do as we please and to act with moral carelessness? Paul's response to that is to say, "You are confusing license and liberty when, in reality, they are two very distinct actions". And to make that argument, Paul moves away from his metaphor of baptism to a metaphor of slavery.

The issue, Paul suggests, is not between that of slavery and freedom. It is between slavery to sin or slavery to God. No one is truly free, because all people serve some one or some thing – whether it is lust or money or power or beauty or a spouse or an institution or God. The issue is not whether you will be slave or free; the issue is to which master you will belong!

"Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" (vss. 16-18).

All are slaves. But all slavery implies a peculiar kind of freedom, Paul suggests. If you are a slave to a master, *ipso facto* you are free of obedience to any other slave-owner. Likewise, if you are a slave to a master, you are free of any other economic indebtedness or political tyranny, because you are under the protection of your master. Thus, if you live your life focused on a lust for power, greed for wealth or the need to dominate and control, you are enslaved by these evil powers, and consequently you are not free to act justly, to share wealth or to care for God or others. It is against your very nature.

But if you belong to God because you have received God's embrace, you are centered in a growing relationship with God that will lead you toward living your life acting justly, sharing wealth and acting with mercy. Conversely, you have been set free from the lust of power, from greed and from domination. You have changed masters. You are still a slave, but now you are God's slave rather than Satan's slave!

If, therefore, you have become a slave of God's, you will embrace moral obligation, not be free of it. If you are God's slave, you will not want license to do as you please and to act with moral carelessness, because you will want to do that which is pleasing to your master. (Note: in verse 19. Paul concedes the limitations of his metaphor of slavery, recognizing that a slave could conceivably resent enslavement by his master and thus work against him. But he wants to make his point and therefore asks his readers to just follow his argument rather than insisting on exceptions to it.)

Thus, Paul concludes, "What advantage did you get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of these things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vss. 21-23).

You Christians formerly belonged to the Powers of the world and, like them, you acted to control others, to lord it over them, to seek to make as much money as possible at their expense, and even to worship that power. What's the advantage of living that way, Paul asks. Why, in the final analysis, its advantage is "death". You end up becoming enslaved by the very forces you sought to use to serve your own agenda. You become enslaved by your money. You become fearful of being toppled from whatever power you have accumulated. You end up devoid of a loving and caring relationship with God and others. You become enslaved by that you sought to enslave. You end up with death!

But what's the advantage of living for Christ and His Kingdom? What's the advantage of becoming God's slave? You live your life to empower others, to enable people to lift themselves from poverty, and to both embrace God and others. And what do you get back? Embrace! Self-sufficient people! The love and respect of others! Therefore, who in the final analysis, wins? He who ends with the most toys? Or she who ends loved by the world for the contributions she has made to the lives of others?

"For the wages of sin is death. But the free gift of God (to those who responded to God's grace-filled love of them) is fulfilling and complete life in Christ Jesus our Lord"!

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