

June 22, 2014

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

by Rick Carlberg

Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

For those of you who have heard me give the message before, I normally use the day's scripture lesson as the basis of the message. Today's scripture is tough to understand, and I have to confess my mind wandered a bit to get a meaningful start, a foundation to weave in the scripture at the right points. My mind has been on the outdoors and getting out of town. Due to the bad winter we had I have really enjoyed being outside this spring, with summer only officially beginning yesterday (specifically per the Farmer's Almanac at 5:51 AM Central Time).

So far it is starting out to be the typical summer. We have had a good spring... about the right amount of rain and sunshine. My mind is on the outdoors. I have my annual trip to the great fly in at Oshkosh at the end of July to look forward to. There is also the upkeep of our property, primarily lawn mowing, weeding, bush trimming, fertilizing and so on that I enjoy working on.

Joanna and I plan to take our vacation in September, going to England to see her 93 year old mother, relatives and friends. We will rent a car, one with manual shift and drive on the other side of the road, what the English call the "correct side", sitting in the right front seat and shifting with my left hand through 5 or 6 gears. It is not as bad as it seems. I find it enjoyable due to the novelty of it and this time we are going to use my GPS to make it easier to get to places we have never been, including the grave of my only known English ancestor, who died in 1850. The only downer is we are expecting to pay \$8.42 per gallon for petrol, so count your blessings we are paying under \$4.00 per gallon right now for gasoline.

It makes a wonderful diversion from being cooped up inside, whether it be in the office or hunkered down at home in a bad snow storm. Just thinking about the outdoor activities, that welcome break in the day to day routine, is a source of something to look forward to. I will even deal with the jet lag to see some beautiful English countryside and after a long day sip a pint of fine English bitter at the local pub. Ahhh....

Then Paul in his letter to the Romans we read today slaps us up side the head. Rick, forget about that fun stuff, that outside work and that vacation you planned. Don't you realize what Christ did for you?

Well, yes, but someone has to mow my lawn, clip those bushes and fly on that British Airways 747.. and drive that stick shift car from the right front seat on the opposite side of the road while completely jet lagged after crossing 6 time zones in a coach seat, maybe getting 1 to 2 hours of sleep. Can't I enjoy some hard earned relaxation?

Remember what Christ did for you.

OK, OK, OK... I will put aside those escape thoughts from my mind for the next few minutes. What does Paul really say Christ did for us?... but Rick you need to be quick about it as I need to figure out the day to day detail of that trip. We need to cram in as many visits to friends and relatives as we possibly can, paying \$8.42 per gallon, driving on the wrong side of the road, excuse me the correct side, of the road... stick shift in my left hand, navigating the roundabouts that are now creeping into our mid-western roads, but turning in the opposite direction.

Remember what Christ did for you. Remember what Christ did for you. Remember what Christ did for you. [PAUSE] Let's go back and look at that reading from Romans again and we will see what Christ did for us.

This is one of Paul's most inspirational writings. He turns faith on its head. Paul focuses as much on the death of Christ as he does on his resurrection. He directly relates the death of Christ to the death of our sin.. we are baptized in his death. Not only are we baptized in his death, our sins are buried with him. Think about it: Our sins are buried with Christ, never to be seen again.

Paul goes on. We are resurrected like him into life everlasting. The person we use to be before we became Christ's follower is dead, irrelevant, gone forever. We are transformed into a life everlasting. Death is the new irrelevant. Death is gone forever. Death is dead for those who believe in the truth related by Paul in our reading today.

In the last sentence of this reading is the "gotcha": You have to believe all this is true. Paul tells us we "must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." No wishy-washy, just put a toe in the water commitment, but a full jump in the water emersion to accept this gift.

This requirement for a full commitment is emphasized in the gospel reading today. It is perhaps one of the most harsh sounding words of Jesus, particularly about needing to love Jesus more than your own parents.. or your own children.

So let's take a little closer look at the Gospel lesson today. We will skip over the reference to Beelzebul, which in Hebrew means Lord of the Flies, and look at the verses about fear. We should not be fearful about those that attack our bodies, but we need to fear those that can kill body and spirit. And, we have the mention of hell. Hell, the word, comes from the Hebrew word hinnom, meaning the "Valley of Hinnom", just south of Jerusalem and outside the city walls.. Literally it is the dumps, a junk yard... and perpetually on fire. It is also the location during the bad kings of Judah, Ahaz and Manasseh, where they performed human sacrifice to satisfy their Amorite gods. Can you imagine a more descriptive place for eternal punishment?

We can skip concerns about that if we acknowledge Christ. In verse 32 we have a promise from Jesus that if we acknowledge him, he will acknowledge us before the

father, but if we deny our relationship with Christ he will deny us before the father. So get committed if you want eternal life.

In verse 38, we hear about taking the cross of Christ and following him. Now, back when this was written the cross was a symbol of death, a tortuous death. That is why in the early church the symbol of a fish is common, whether it be in the catacombs of Rome or ancient literature. In my opinion, what the cross represents in this scripture is the commitment to follow Christ, even to the point of death. You are not just involved with a cross, if you are on it you are very much committed. Much like a hen is involved in the making of breakfast by providing eggs, the pig is committed when there needs to be bacon with those eggs.

Now, I also believe that we do not have to go out of our way to get ourselves nailed on to a cross, but Christ is actively encouraging us to receive Christ into our hearts. Do not deny it, do not be wishy-washy about it. Become immersed in the holy spirit... in short be baptized in it. Become all in. Become the new person Christ wants us to be. Live your life with the Holy Spirit guiding your actions.

Living your life as Christ directs you is not the proverbial “bed of roses”. There are going to be challenges, even open conflict, with others, including members of your own family. We have all experienced family conflict... it is not a pleasure to deal with... and it is a major source of heart ache, frustration and guilt. We all lead different lives, but we will be held accountable for the way we lead our life. This is that part of Matthew where Christ refers to his coming is not to bring peace, but a sword.

I had to do some research, and I hope I have found something to help explain this apparent contradiction about Jesus bringing a sword. On the surface it does not make sense that Christ would carry a sword... after all we associate Jesus with peace, love, acceptance, forgiveness and understanding. In the ancient world the sword meant many things, most associated with death and destruction, but there are more subtle meanings, such as 1) authority, a dominion over all; 2) The word of God, also known as the truth; 3) Protection, protection of his followers. We cannot forget however, that the sword is a symbol of judgment.

There goes that commitment thing again. We have to accept the authority that Christ represents, the word that supports us on a day by day basis, accept that protection to make us worthy of being on the right side of God's divine judgment.

So the sword is not just about death and destruction, as symbolized when you unsheathe the sword. It has other meanings to make us appreciate what Christ has done for us. Even in ancient time putting the sword back into the sheath is a symbol of peace and friendship. A sword in its sheath still has the authority, the word and protection.

So, the next time you are mowing your lawn, weeding your garden or planning every detail of your upcoming vacation, remember the lessons from today's scripture. From Romans we learn that when Christ died, our sins died with him. Death is dead. We are

no longer our old self, we are a new being in Christ, alive and doing very well in the full life Christ has for us.

From the gospel of Matthew, we learn about the need to accept the authority of Christ. Stand with Christ and Christ will stand before the father for you. He has a sword, a sword of authority, a sword of the word of God, a sword of protection. For those that believe, the sword is in its sheath.. but always available for use whether it be on the good or the bad side of judgment.

So let's lead our lives, whether in the day to day mundane activities of lawn mowing or planning a vacation, in the example of Christ. We can go from death to life with a simple, but all in, commitment to our lord and savior. Believe, just believe, in what Christ offers us and you will find a new self, one destined for eternal life.

Amen