

July 12, 2020
Seventeenth Sunday of Online Worship

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

Walking On Water: Life Before Death

Exodus 7: 14-18

Romans 8: 1-11

The second reading is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 1 through 11:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You recall that we are “wading in the water” over these six weeks of Pastor Susan's sabbatical. Last week we were in the waters of freedom, especially focused on choice and action...making decisions that are sometimes good and sometimes not so good for ourselves and others. We pursued the importance of knowing that, just as with the abundance of water around us, we should not take the *freedom* that surrounds us for granted either. Here, in the beginning of week two, we consider what it means to “walk” *on* the water.

Surfing is the closest I can come to walking on water. The bulletin cover this week features an oil painting that hangs in our Mission Director's home. I actually saw Lindsey Hemelstrand's painting on the wall behind her in a Zoom staff meeting. It caught my attention because of the pier and the multi-colored impression of the water as it takes on the form of waves and rolls into the sand.

I grew up near such a setting in Jacksonville, Florida and learned to surf there when I was in high school. Alan Jones taught me everything I know about surfing...we used to hold surfboards over



the side and on the back of his 1965 Corvette Stingray...red and white...and head to the beach nearly every day all summer. If you know anything about Florida beaches you'll know that this is not all that impressive. Florida beach waves are not that big a deal... unless there is a hurricane of course. Nevertheless, the basic principles of surfing are life lessons and apply to all of us currently as we are attempting to view and walk on the waters of the pandemic and racial injustice without drowning.

In addition to the practicalities of paddling out to catch a wave and learning to stand up on a surfboard, the realities of the undercurrent and jack-knifing on a board while surfing command that one must commit to respecting and learning about the water itself. Seeking to understand the ocean is lesson number one in surfing.

In similar fashion, this is what we are all trying to do these days...seeking to understand the unique waters we are in. From Creation water is basic and essential in making and sustaining life. We have acknowledged that our behavior in using water is unpredictable because we use it for both good and destructive purposes in this life. Since behavior comes from our free choice, the reality is that we cannot take anyone's good behavior in the water for granted...no matter how disciplined or committed we might be.

Water, like life itself, seems to have a mind of its own and has much to teach us about uncertainty and challenge, endurance and perseverance. The ebb and flow of circumstance and difficulty and opportunity is endless. We long for freedom from those challenges and the consequences of the unexpected, like in this pandemic, and the sometimes unjust treatment of others. So, again, lesson number 1: get to know about and understand the water you are in.

Lesson two has to do with knowing what your own purpose in being in the water is. This includes but is not limited to being aware of and respectful of other surfers. It means that you look out not just for yourself but also for those around you...and help somebody else out if there is a problem. This week, in the lectionary from the Apostle Paul in Romans, we see what happens when mistakes are made in our living. This most often occurs when we think more of ourselves than we should; when we look at life through a filter that asks, "What does this say about ME; how is this going to benefit me?" The Bible is filled with these kind of mistakes...choices made out of the freedom we have to choose...often going against what God has told us is right or appropriate in deference to our selfish wants. Examples like the choice to eat the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden, Cain's killing his own brother because of jealousy, the stealing of birthrights and so on...all focused on self rather than God's Law and love of others.

Paul tells the church at Rome that he, effectively, is not surprised by any of this. Men and women are bound to make bad decisions sometimes (a lot actually)...to "sin," to use the religious term for misuse of freedom. Humanity is subject to mortality...in bondage to it. It comes with Creation and is the cost of having free will. We may be, on the one hand, free to exercise our will in whatever ways we want but we are constrained by the limits of our mortality or being human, on the other hand, and therefore bound to the Law of sin and death, the things put in place and intended to control and discipline us. There are lots of judgments to go around in this scenario...judgment and condemnation and punishment that goes with the Law of the Old Testament. Bondage to sin and death is a terrifying end in itself that offers no hope for life after death.

But the Apostle proclaims another freedom beyond the original freedom of the free will given to us at Creation. It is a freedom that we may use in life before death. It is a bigger and better freedom that overrides the judgement of the Law; a freedom given to us by Jesus Christ. It is a freedom that allows us not to have to live by “the flesh” but by the Spirit which overcomes mortality. [Now]...*you are no longer in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you,*” says the Apostle. *Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.* This section of the text closes with the assurance that *if we suffer with Christ, we may be glorified in him.*

Since poor choices and bad behavior seem to be “givens” with us, and knowing that the consequence of such sin is death, these words of Paul’s are good news. It certainly helps us endure inevitable suffering because we know that ultimately the victory will be won by salvation.

My aunt’s favorite phrase is, “This too shall pass.” And by that she means not only that the current trouble she is experiencing will be resolved, but that all tribulation in this world will eventually cease to have its hold on us. It is a good attitude but the suffering remains real and endurance can be difficult, as we know all too well these days.

It is no wonder that we might reasonably ask, what is the point of this life before death anyway if it is going to be so painful and so hard?

This takes us back to lesson two in the water; know your place and your purpose, and stay focused.

An older woman up in Massachusetts who was in her 90’s at the time...so not even as old as Charlie Phelps who just turned 102...was asked, “To what do you owe your many years?”

“To time,” she said. “The Lord has kept me around for a mighty long time; I guess he still has something for me to do, so I’ll keep on trying to find out what it is.” I’ve heard similar sentiment from Randy Fisher whose wife and son have both died within the last couple of years. He wonders and asks in the video on Grace Notes that we made at Woods, “Why, God, am I the one left?” Seeking purpose in our lives is essential to life before death. Why are you here?

I believe that God has set each one of us here to help redeem the many poor choices and decisions we and others have made...to help recover them from the bondage to sin and death of which Paul speaks...to redeem this time and put God’s will into action. We each will do that in different and diverse ways. But each of us, as Christ-followers, must do just that.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes offers some suggestions on life purpose in his writing on redemption:

“The civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the ecology movement, the women’s movement, the movements for ethnic freedom and dignity, the movement in search of meaning and values...these movements are not accidents of sociology upon our neutral landscape. They are the legitimate movements of our time...movements through which God can and does speak to us of our opportunities for redemption and hope.

“Idealism has always been out of fashion, especially in a place where cynicism is a cheap substitute for wisdom. But it is the energy of the ideal which in seeking its redemptive opportunity has made and can make the children of God more than passive spectators of passing time. Such an idealism requires an interior strength to meet our Godly opportunity.”

Woods Church is filled with people with an interior strength ready to meet up with Godly opportunities. Again, lesson two in surfing tells us that we need to know about the water we are in. Life before death is not so much about WHAT we do with our time in that water as it is about what God has already done with it. Our participation in God’s redemption is what it is about. There is a Jewish image that if and when everyone on earth were to do good deeds...use their time as God intended...everyone were to be performing mitzvahs all at the same time, that the cords that bind the Messiah would be released, and the long-awaited Messiah would come.

However you choose to look at your life’s purpose, it should be that which contributes to the unleashing of God’s spirit, power, and grace in the world.

Lesson three in surfing: humility. You have to be humble in the water...in your life circumstances...you have to be in those places with humility or you’ll drown. We are always out of place in the water...it’s not our natural habitat. We are also out of place here on earth, according to Paul, because we do not belong to the flesh. We belong to the Spirit. The moment we lose focus on that and begin to think more of ourselves and our self-sufficiency we are doomed.

None of us is any better than the next person. It is a humbling truth and reality sometimes to know that we aren’t “all that” as the phrase goes...to know that we are not able to run our own lives without help. But there it is.

If you’ve shopped at the Safeway grocery store in Arnold, you are familiar with that voice that comes over the speaker about every five minutes...the little too happy voice...that warns about keeping two cart lengths between you and the next shopper and following the direction arrows, staying safe. The message ends with the words, “We’re all in this together.” My fantasy is that we might get just such a message from God as we walk around in the world and make decisions and act on them in our living...that every so often God’s voice would remind us, “We are all in this together.”

We *are* all in this together...the pandemic, the crisis of social justice, and God’s redemption in history. We should enter all of these together, (1)seeking to understand them as best we can, getting to know all aspects and perspectives; (2)discovering and knowing our unique places and roles in the process, and committing to participate and take action faithfully; and (3) walking, swimming humbly through whatever our “waters” are. And when we wade in that water...whatever form it takes...we must do so with a faith that believes that each one of us is uniquely placed here and now with purpose and ability.

Maltbie Davenport Babcock, American clergyman and writer of the 19th century, wrote this poem entitled “Be Strong”:

“Be strong!

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift;
We have hard work to do and loads to lift;

Shun not the struggle, face it, 'tis God's gift.

Be strong...

Say not the days are evil – who's to blame?

And fold the hands and acquiesce – O shame!

Stand up, speak out, and bravely, in God's name.

Be strong...

It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong,

How hard the battle goes, the day, how long;

Faint not, fight on! Tomorrow comes the song.

Be strong, be strong, be strong!

Be strong no matter what water you are in. Learn about that water, discover it, know what is before you. Discover and follow your purpose and God's plan for you...and do so with humility and awareness that we, as God's people, are in this together.

For who knows but that you are here....that you have come to the kingdom...for just such a time as this...to participate in God's redemption of all things. Amen.