

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 7a
Jeremiah 20:7-13
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

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I knew a woman who died and came back to life. Norma belonged to a congregation I served. I knew her when she was elderly, but when she was a girl of 8 or 9 she had a near-death or even beyond-death experience. What Norma remembered is that she was held in God's arms, she was held securely in God's love. And because of that, throughout her life she always had a radiant sense of God being near her and holding her, especially in times of trouble. People actually described Norma as fearless. She had the gift of deep calm in the face of adversity. When her husband died, a strong man she depended on, people expected Norma to fall apart. And she did grieve deeply -- but she never despaired. When she developed leukemia later on, Norma held onto that vision of God holding onto her, and she was carried by that vision until the day of her own death. It strengthened her, and it also strengthened the people around her.

That experience of dying and rising again, changed Norma forever. And scripture says that you and I have had that experience, too.

In our reading from Romans, St. Paul says we have all died and we have all come back to life, never to be the same again. In fact, Paul says that's what Christian life is. Christian life is about our dying and God raising us up. Paul says,

We have been made one with Christ's death, buried with Christ...

We have died to sin... Our old self has been crucified... (Strong language!)

AND, Paul says,

We've risen to walk in newness of life...

We live now with Christ, fully alive to God.

We are united in a resurrection like that of Jesus.

I find this dying and rising to be an incredibly provocative image. When we linger with this passage, we learn that Christian life is all about ending something old and beginning something new. Dying to our former self and rising to a new way of being. Christian life is about trusting God to kill what needs killing in us, and trusting God to make alive what needs to live. I wonder what that can mean for us...

I believe the first Christians who received Paul's letter in Rome would have understood immediately. They were among the first wave of Christians, living just 25 years after Jesus. So those first Christians could remember back to a time before they became followers of Christ, before they'd even heard of Christ, before Christ had a claim on their life. And they could vividly remember the experience of their baptism – most likely they were led down to a river or an underground cistern, and in baptism they were pushed completely under the water – in a symbolic sense they were drowned, killed, made dead to sin through God's power -- then they were lifted out of the water dripping and maybe shivering, and definitely alert (!) to a new life. Some of those first Christians paid the price for making a break with the old ways. Families cut them off when they decided to follow Christ, business contacts faded away when they refused to make sacrifices to the Roman gods like everyone else did. They could not worship those Roman gods because now their allegiance was to the One God. Those early followers of Jesus knew what it was to have God rearrange your priorities and loyalties – so much so that you became literally a new person and could never go back.

Some of us may remember that change too, especially if we were claimed by Christ later in life or if we've had a powerful experience of returning to the faith after a time away, returning when we needed a new start. Some of us might remember our own baptism day, if we were a child or adult. Or we might remember making the decision to join a church, to declare our faith publicly in a sanctuary like this. And we might be able to recognize a clear difference between who we used to be, and who we are now, in Christ, making different choices, holding different values, pursuing different goals.

If we were baptized as babies, we might not remember a "before" time – so we're called to consider the difference between who we might have been without baptism, without Christ's love, and who we are today, by the grace of God, marked with the cross and carrying the name Christian.

Either way, Saint Paul says baptism into Christ is something that changes us fundamentally. Baptism is not just a special blessing or an extra gift that adds to our life. Baptism rearranges our life and reorients us. God in Christ intervenes. Grasps us. Forgives us. Turns us around. God actually converts us with holy love and divine power. And once God claims us this way, there's no going back.

Of course we can try to ignore our baptism, pretend nothing's changed, turn our back on God. Some people do. But God calls us forward, not back. God calls us to let our lives reflect our new status, to take specific steps to bring our actions and attitudes into line with the new person we've become. God calls us to make choices that reflect God's

reality and God's loving perspective. To act in ways that show that while we are living in this world, we don't belong to this world. We truly belong to God.

In the book of Romans, St. Paul calls it "dying to sin" and "being made alive to God in Christ." We no longer answer to the forces of evil and the lies of this world. Because God has broken the power of these lies.

For example, the world tells us that human beings should be valued according to their credit ratings, luxury vehicles, name-brand clothing, retirement accounts. The world ranks people according to their popularity and success. The world says, *serve yourself, get yours, climb*. But Jesus says, *give it away. Lose your life* – then you'll find it.

Because in baptism we are dead to sin and alive in Christ, we don't answer to worldly powers any more. We only answer to God.

We don't answer to consumer values. We don't put our trust in possessions -- in money, in houses, in cars. (Do we.) We don't expect things to save us – we know only God can. And we don't let ourselves be defined by other people's opinions either. We don't let their approval lift us up, or their disapproval drive us down. (Do we.) The question is not, how many points am I scoring in pleasing other people? The really important question is, how am I entrusting myself to God? How am I offering myself as a vehicle of God's love and goodness, so I become part of the amazing, saving work that God is accomplishing in this world every day.

I hope we can see that "dying to sin" is not about us working real hard to be good. It does involve effort, and dedication, and prayer. We do have a part in changing habits, altering our values, setting faithful goals. But being God's people is finally not about us trying to live a squeaky-clean life. Instead it's about God's love working in us – God saving us -- God setting us free from that old self and making us new, again and again.

Martin Luther said that every day we die to sin and rise again to new life. Every day, we are forgiven and made new through God's love. Every day, God puts an end to what kills life in us – and God grows in us what gives life, what looks like Jesus.

Every day, God turns us away from selfishness and toward love – the wide, world-changing love of Jesus that looks remarkably different from the world's love. Love that forgives. Love that welcomes the stranger. Love that speaks up against injustice. Love that shares its wealth and cares for the vulnerable. Love that turns the other cheek. Love that picks up the cross and carries it. Love that goes the second mile. Love that looks like Jesus.

Today is an opportunity for each of us to reflect on how we are living out God's wonderful gift of baptism.

I wonder... what might God be calling you to die to, these days?

And I wonder... what is God working to bring to life in you?

And how can each of us be open to this amazing movement of God's Spirit...

One thing's for sure. God has made us new people in Christ. May God bless each one of us in this amazing journey of love.

In Jesus' name, Amen.