

Body of Christ/Body of Sin

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
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Last Sunday, we read from chapters nine and ten of Matthew and heard some very difficult teachings of Jesus, words that challenge our sense of discipleship and commitment, words that are neither soothing nor comforting. Today, we picked up in Matthew ten where we left off last week, and we heard that Jesus came not to bring peace, but a sword. He then illustrates this by telling how loyalty to him can cause divisions within a family.

This time I am going to turn to the Second Lesson, Romans 6, as the starting point of reference for my sermon. This portion of Romans is power packed for the baptized, for you and me. What Paul describes in these verses is what went on when I was baptized and then taught the faith into which I was baptized. I was baptized in December of 1938 and claimed by Christ through water and the word. I was made a Christian. I'm still learning what it means to be a Christian, but the origin of it all was on the wonderful day two months after my birth.

In the first part of Romans, Paul declares the wonders of the grace of God as recorded so beautifully in three statements within the first five chapters. First from chapter 1:16-17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to Everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the Righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one Who is righteous will live by faith.

And in 3:28 which reads:

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Later in chapter 5 verse 1 Paul writes:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Martin Luther found great comfort in these elegant words and taught "By grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone." The grace of God in Christ Jesus was paramount in his understanding of the faith.

Paul faced a challenge when he proclaimed the grace of God. The question that arose is now introduced in chapter 6. “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1). Does it matter that we sin – offend and dishonor the Lord God, since God will forgive anyway?

First, we need to make sure we define “sin” in the same way so we can have a conversation about sin. Many varying understandings abound.

I recall some teaching that sin was defined as smoking, drinking, and dancing. Those were sinful behaviors. Oh, there might have been a few more behaviors added to that list, but they all had to do with individual morality. Someone who thought this way expressed to me the belief that individuals could overcome sin. He illustrated his point by saying that a person could stop smoking and thereby stop sinning in that way. That was overcoming sin.

How do you feel about that view of sin. Just stop a certain, defined behavior, and you can stop sinning. If only it were that simple.

Others place the stress on the Ten Commandments. Disobeying the Ten Commandments is sinful. That enlarges the question a bit to things like idolatry, swearing, killing, adultery, stealing, lying, coveting. Can’t argue with that, but the application of these offenses in human life and living is where the problems arise. Did God mean that the Hebrews could not kill another Hebrew but killing non-Hebrews was all right? Is that how to understand the fifth commandment? Does the commandment against killing apply to war? Would that be a correct application of this commandment? Some even suggest that we should not slaughter animals because that is killing life that God created. Where and what is sin? Sometimes we have to think really hard about these questions and not assume that what we learned in confirmation or even yesterday is sufficient for today’s dilemmas.

Paul also uses a curious phrase that we read in verse 6:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed.

“Body of sin.” What in the world is that? We are used to hearing the phrase “body of Christ” but not the “body of sin.” Oops, we also have to clarify the use of “body of Christ” for we Christians have two different uses of that phrase. In Holy Communion, when distributing the bread or wafers, I address each one whom I serve by saying, “The Body of Christ given for you.” Paul in writing to the congregation in Corinth says:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
1 Corinthians 12:27

In that instance, Paul uses the phrase to identify the Christian Church. The Church is the body of Christ on earth. So the collective of believers is the body of Christ. Just like in

the Old Testament, we read about the people of Israel, or the Chosen People. The plural is greater than the sum of the individuals, because in this case the Lord God makes it so. We use the same phrase – body of Christ – two times with different meanings: Holy Communion and the Church.

In the same way, when Paul uses the phrase “body of sin,” he has in mind this a parallel to “the body of Christ” referring to the Church. “Body of sin” is a larger force of evil that is beyond me but engulfs me, conditions my mind and influences my actions in ways that offend the Lord God. We pray about this at every worship service when, in the Lord’s Prayer, we say:

Lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.

That’s not just bad things that happen to us, but it is that which pulls us away from Christ.

Outside of us bombarding us with power antithetical to the Lord, opposed to love, compassion, and justice, is evil – a force that works to undermine our commitment, loyalty, and love of God. This body of sin does not repel us or appear ugly. It is very appealing. This body of sin still violates God’s will of love, grace, mercy, and goodness. It is larger than me as an individual – far greater than, “Will I stop smoking?” It goes way beyond individual ethical and moral choices, for it acknowledges that some forces and factors of life come at me from outside of myself to invade my heart and mind and have a powerful influence on me.

For instance, when Pastor Wayne Wissenbuehler became Bishop of the Rocky Mountain Synod in 1988, I spoke with him about seeking a Call to serve a different congregation. At the time I was 49 years of age. In conversation with him, he indicated that Call Committees were requesting names of pastors in their 30’s and early 40’s and would not interview pastors in their late 40’s and older.

Bishop Wissenbuehler’s question to Call Committees, as he told me, was, “What shall I do with pastors of that age group then? Shoot them?”

Is ageism part of the “body of sin” in our time and place? Other instances include the harm done to all by the Savings and Loan crisis of 20 years ago and the number of people hurt by the collapse of Enron and other corporations. We are affected and afflicted by sin that is more than individual morality. We are confronted by “the body of sin” that surrounds us and which we encounter in many forms and ways.

This biblical description of reality does not conform to the way we have been taught to think and understand, for the culture in which we, as inheritors of Western Civilization have been convinced to concentrate on the individual. I struggle with this tension between what the body of believers (the Church) needs and what I need every day. Most of the time the tension comes from what I know the Church on earth needs and what I want. Christ’s call to be the Church living in the world but not of the world places you

and me in a precarious and blessed place. When we take Christ seriously, we are always out of step with the way of the world.

Paul writes that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. There is One, the Son of God, that has conquered sin – not just my individual offenses against God’s will, but he has conquered sin and evil. He did so by submitting to death on a cross and by being raised from the grave by the power of the Father. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:3-6), either our individual offenses or in cooperation with the “body of sin” – the evils that surround us.

Thanks be to God for the power of God’s grace that has overcome – in the words of Martin Luther - sin, death, and the power of the devil. Amen.