

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost • June 22, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Romans 6:1-11

“New”

We love the new. Looking at the world around us, even just looking at how we spend our time and money, it seems that we just can't get enough of the new. This summer, people are heading out to the movie theaters each weekend to see blockbuster new releases, many of which are new takes on classic (and not-so-classic) tales from the past. Americans are people on the lookout for the next, greatest thing. Consider the field of technology: in less than a month, the new version of the iPhone will be released; faster, more powerful, and less expensive, this iPhone looks to break the sales record that the last version set. Every year, auto makers roll out new models of cars onto their dealer's lots, and people still throng to the auto shows to see what's on the drawing board for the years ahead. Closer to home, don't you think that it would be nice to have a new tool set, or at least an 18-volt power screwdriver to tackle those tough jobs around the house? And then there's that party you'll be attending next week – it'd be great if you could get a new pair of shoes to replace that worn-out stuff that's just sitting in the closet, taking up space. Come to think of it, how interested would you be in going out and replacing your wardrobe with used clothing? And the next time that you go to the supermarket to do a little shopping, check out the “cleaning products” aisle and see how many detergents offer the benefit of being “New and Improved!” We *love* the new.

But we hate the new. Or, more specifically stated, we hate the change that comes along with the new. “New” does not mean “good,” but it usually does mean “change.” The new is something different, something that has not come along before, something with which we do not necessarily have experience. The new can lead us to feel afraid, because we might fear that we're getting left behind. The new confronts us, and, sometimes, we can't avoid it. We hate the new when it means that we need to change how we do things: it can threaten our comfortable complacency, especially when we have to revisit something that's “always been done that way.” If this all seems rather conceptual and unclear to you, try driving around our beloved northern Virginia as new traffic patterns affect the morning commute!

Our sinful self – the “old self” of which Paul speaks in our lesson today from his letter to the Romans – hates the new: the newness of life to which we are raised in Christ. That self, the former identity in which we lived before Jesus' intervention, was perfectly happy to go on in sin. The old self doesn't want to change, because it believes that things are fine as-is. The old self, you see, got to play at being a god, disregarding our heavenly Father's instruction and chasing after whatever pleasure it could find, one after the next. But isn't that a funny thing? The old self is always on the lookout for the “new and improved,” the yet more beautiful, the yet more entertaining, the yet more powerful. The old self, though it doesn't want to change, never seems to be satisfied with what it has. It knows that it is lacking! And because it is captive to sin and to death, still it rebels against real, fundamental change: that which is truly *new*.

God brings the new in Christ Jesus. Through the gift of faith, God connects us with the victory and freedom that Jesus won for us on the cross. Without faith, the old self is held captive by its own desires and passions. The old self rejects that Jesus, the Son of God, gives what it cannot possess: newness of life. Jesus can give this newness of life because he did something truly new in history, something that our old self could never do: Jesus lived out the Father's will and fulfilled all the demands of the law. Because of Christ's faithfulness, the unjust are justified, and those who had been captive to the next, greatest thing are set free.

In our text today, God uses some pretty strong language, showing us what it means to live in that freedom and teaching us what it means to be Christians. In the movie *The Princess Bride* – not a

new movie, but a classic – one of the heroes of the story, Westley, is tortured by an infernal machine which sucks the very life out of him. His friends soon recover his lifeless body, taking him to an elderly magician named Miracle Max. Max sagely ascertains that Westley is not, in fact, “all dead,” but rather, “mostly dead.” Someone who is “mostly dead” is “slightly alive,” so some hope of revival remains. (You’ll have to go watch the movie to see how Westley’s story turns out.) For Paul and for us, however, there’s no such thing as “mostly dead.” Either someone is dead, or they aren’t.

When it comes to the old self, God makes it **dead**. He puts the old self to death on Christ’s cross and buries it in the waters of baptism. It’s not “mostly dead,” it’s “all dead.” Unfortunately, we human beings have a hard time accepting that, and we spend way too much time trying to perform CPR on the old self. That’s the struggle that we face as Christians, the same struggle that Paul is talking about today. When Paul writes that we have died to sin, he’s proclaiming a clear distinction to make us aware of the new thing that God has done. Sin’s power over us has been broken. Thanks to Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice, sin does not hold us enslaved any longer. It has been brought to nothing and rendered powerless: it does not control our actions and does not dictate how we go about our day-to-day life. We have been forgiven and freed. Because their old self has been buried with Christ, Christians, too, experience resurrection and new life – both in the present and at the end of time.

Through faith, God has raised you from spiritual death, and He now calls you to walk in newness of life. Having been liberated from slavery to sin, you are now free to make choices in life. The Christian life is one of accountability to God, and our choices should reflect that accountability. Paul poses this question to the Christians in Rome and to you: Will you embrace the life to which God has called you? In the week ahead, will you walk in newness of life, or will you jump back into the rotting tomb of death, trying to revive the old self, acting like it’s only “mostly dead?” Thanks be to God for the gift of His Spirit, through which we may through the devil’s temptations and lies!

The old self loves the new. The old self hates the new. But through Jesus’ cross, the old self is dead, and God has raised you to new life. And in this newness of life in which you have been called to walk, God is at work. You are made into something new. God reshapes His people into what Paul calls “instruments for righteousness.” Your hands and feet and mouth and mind and heart are given new purpose: they need no longer serve the dead former self to which they had once been enslaved. They are now free to work in joyful service to friends, neighbors, and the stranger, sharing that which is eternally new: God’s love.

Living under grace, you are now an instrument for righteousness: God is at work in and through His people to bring new life into a dying world.

Amen.