

June 25, 2017, 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: Christ makes us alive to God.

As I said earlier, this past week was Vacation Bible School from Monday-Thursday. Now each night of VBS, there were 4 stops: snacks—as those of you who made 400 graham cracker crosses know all too well, Bible (of course), crafts, and, my favorite, games.

Now if it were up to me, the games probably would have been basic like dodgeball or kickball or freeze tag. But these games all tried to teach the kids something. The game that really stands out is on Wednesday night, the elementary school kids had a really complicated one. The kids formed a line—our group had 7 people—and each of them held a part of a foam pool noodle (about a foot long). At the end, I held a bucket of marbles. The idea was that I would drop a marble into the pool noodle, and then they would have to hold it in the noodle, take their noodle over and put it on top of the next one and drop it through until that person would go to the next one and down the line. Yeah, if you're confused, it took me as the leader 15 minutes to figure out what we were even supposed to be doing. (We didn't win.)

But in a way that was the moral of this game. As you can imagine with 6- and 7-year-olds, even as I was screaming in my Old Ball Coach voice, "Lightning fast!" it didn't always work that way. A lot of times the marble dropped and hit the ground. A lot of times, as we talked to the kids later, we mess up.

Sometimes we drop the ball. Sometimes we get all blocked up. Sometimes we get impatient with the next person over. And sometimes we forget what we're supposed to be doing altogether. Those times when we mess up, we told them, that's called sin. Sin gets in the way of our relationship with God.

Now we'll get there in a moment. But for a minute, think about sometime when you've really messed up. I don't mean a time when you slept in for church on a Sunday morning (although please don't do that either!) but when you've done something really bad. We all know those times. When we say the wrong thing—not just the wrong thing, but something really mean, really harsh to someone, when we cut someone down, maybe we even hurt them physically, maybe it's someone who's important to us, who's a role model or a father or mother figure to us, and we just know that we've disappointed them so bad. Or maybe a dear friend or a spouse.

So whatever it is you've pictured in your mind, say you've messed up. And you come to yourself. You realize what you've done. And now comes the hard part. You see the person you hurt again. And there's that long pause before either of you speaks.

What is the thing you are worried they are going to say?

Well, they could get red in the face, but we know that we deserve it. They could tell us we've really messed up, but we know that they're right. But you know what I think would be hardest? It wouldn't be a fit of rage. It wouldn't be anger. It probably wouldn't even be sadness or disappointment. It would just be the person looking straight at you and saying:

You are dead to me.

You are dead to me. There is no coming back from that. Because when someone's angry, when someone's sad, you can try to fix it. You can make them breakfast the next morning, or if you're me, you can be such an irresistibly sweet husband the next 24 hours, that she can't help but take you back! But **You are dead to me** is the hardest thing. It's the end of the relationship. Where before you might have had respect, you might have had friendship, you might even have had love, now you have nothing. You have nothing to work with. Your relationship with that person is over. **You are dead to me.**

Folks, here is the really scary thing. That is where we all stand before God. We are sinners. We have messed up in ways big and small. We hurt others. We hurt ourselves. We hurt God who created us to trust him. We hurt God who created us to be in relationship with our fellow human beings who he calls neighbors, to be in relationship with all creation, to be in relationship with **God**. We take that love story written into the universe by the finger of God and we rip it up, put it through the shredder, throw it to the ground, and pretend that the story's really about us: my needs, my desires, my safety, my well-being, my property, *my life* as if it were something that wasn't a gift from God. **My, my, my** time and again. Since that time when God first created us in his image, we have really dropped the ball. If you want proof, just look at how impossible Jesus's words for us in the Gospel reading are today. To be a human means to be a sinner. And to be a sinner means that you die.

You are dead to me. Those are the words that God could throw in our face. But the constant miracle of being a Christian is that every time we know we should hear those words, every time we get ready to meet God after we've really messed up, every time there's that long pause, we hear a different voice speaking:

"In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins." That's really Good News. God brings us back into relationship with him once again—at least once every week we hear that Good News. But how do you know that's true? Because of words spoken by a pastor? Because of what you feel in your heart?

No, not according to Paul today in his letter to the Romans. We know we are forgiven because Christ has already said those words to us. He said those words to you when you were baptized. Listen to what Paul says, "Do you not know that all of you who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" What Paul is getting at is that the real death that takes place in our lives is not when we take our final breath. It's on the day of our baptism. That's the death that counts. Because in baptism, Christ takes us with him to the cross. Christ takes us and all of our sin, he takes all those times that he knows we're going to mess up, he takes all those human failings, he takes all those broken relationships, he even takes our broken relationship with God, and he puts it and us all on the cross with him. And on the cross, Jesus cries out to God, "I AM WITH THEM! I AM FOR THEM! WILL YOU FORSAKE THEM? WILL YOU FORSAKE YOUR OWN SON?"

That is the question of the cross. Will God the Father let Jesus and all of us who in baptism are there with him be forsaken? Will he let Jesus stay dead, festering in our sins? In our baptism, we are united with Christ in this great and terrible moment. Will God look at Jesus and all of us and say in words of finality, "**You are dead to me?**"

No. No, he does not, does he? On the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead. On the third day, on Easter Sunday, Jesus was alive once again. As Paul says, the life he lives, he lives to God. Not dead to God. But alive in the most real way there is, resurrected body and soul, resurrected to live as God intends all of us to live, resurrected even from the sin and death of the cross. Resurrected so that Jesus can turn to sin, death, and the devil and say, **You are dead to me.**

And resurrected so that Jesus can turn to us and promise, just as I live, you also will live. Just as I walked the streets of Galilee once again after the cross and the tomb, you too will walk in newness of life. Those old sins that separated you from God, you are dead to them. They don't have the final say. They don't rule over your life anymore. They don't, as Paul says, **enslave** us anymore. In baptism, sin was drowned, pinned to the cross, buried in the tomb. On the Day of Judgment, when sin rises up before God to accuse us, it will find that it lost its breath, its voice, and its very life a long time ago on a Friday outside Jerusalem. Because Jesus died for you, sin is not the final word between you and God.

The final word is once again the promise of baptism. If we are united in a death like his, surely we will be united in a resurrection like his. That day is still to come. There are still going to be sins, there is still going to be a devil, there is still going to be death ahead of us. We all must face that day. But we can trust that the story begun in baptism ends in eternal life. We can trust that as surely as Jesus died on the cross, as surely as Jesus rose from the tomb, as surely as you waded in the water or were sprinkled on your forehead, you too will walk in newness of life, and that we are never dead to God, but in Christ Jesus, very much alive. **Amen.**