

## “Afterlife”

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost  
N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches  
June 21, 2020 – The Rev. Torrence Harman  
On The Letter of Paul to the Romans 6:1b-11

Old life, new life. Before death, after death. Before baptism, after baptism. Before freedom from slavery, after freedom from slavery. There is a lot of before and after stuff going in in St. Paul’s letter to the Church at Rome in this morning’s Epistle passage from Romans. And that unnerving word “sin” wanders through the passage. What can we make of all of this? And what relevance does any of it have for us as we have been thrust by the world around us into a passage, a transition of sorts between life before and life after. As we are wondering about the yet to come beyond this strangely unsettling time as we long to return to our old ways of living but sense we are being challenged to live in new ways beyond this upheaval.

The term “afterlife” is routinely used in a religious sense to refer to life after death, that is after the physical death of the body. Defined this way there is an assumption, an anticipation, a hope that something of life continues beyond this physical life. That “something” is variously described but consider this: a belief that the essential part of someone’s individual identity or stream of consciousness does continue after the death of the physical body. (Thank you, Dr. Google.) There is the idea in many faith traditions, obviously including Christianity, that after physical death some essential aspects of the person moves into another world, another realm. There is such fascination with this possibility – think of the popularity of books, stories, articles about “near death experiences.” Perhaps this is why we become curious about the Jesus *before* Good Friday and death on the cross and then the Jesus on Easter Sunday, *after* he has passed through death. The fact that no one, not even his closest disciples recognize the “after death” Jesus initially as the before death Jesus. There is something about the after death resurrected Jesus that appears to locate him in a larger “realm” and a larger identity than his before death image occupied.

The text for today’s sermon titled “The Afterlife” is from Paul’s words to first century Christians very much physically alive. Maybe they have relevance to twenty-first century ones too, also physically alive.

“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 . . . so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3-4)

St. Paul’s message today shifts the “before and after” focus essentially to life during this physical life. His message is provocative as it centers around the idea of an old life and a new life with the turning point, the passage from one to the other being a death experience. Not physical death but death to ways of living and being accumulated during the old life. The term “afterlife” still has relevance, though, since our use of the word in our contemporary world offers also the definition of afterlife being a later time in one’s life, that is a part of one’s life after a previous part of life. Consider life

before and after such events/times as childhood, an accident, graduation from something, getting married, children growing up and leaving home, a cancer diagnosis, a major “move” – basically after a “relocation” of life from an old location of heart, mind or body, to a new one.

Paul certainly can write of such a change from life before to life after a defining event during life. His experience on the road to Damascus was a death experience catapulting him into new life. He was a changed man after his experience with Christ at that astounding turning point not just on a Damascus road but on the road between what had been life before and what was yet to become along this roadway we call life. In contemporary stories about people who have had “near death” and/or major life experiences which altered their sense of “How now shall I live?” and led them to embrace life in new ways, there are so many examples of a changed, more abundant experience of life. As if life has become deeper, larger, more light filled – a sense of deeper purpose, brighter light, greater connection with something larger, and a new passion or even peace and harmony about it emerging. This is what happened to Paul. He is speaking here out of personal experience.

Baptism is the image Paul uses in our passage today as he connects the event of baptism with Jesus’ death and resurrection with our death and resurrection from old life to new life. This idea may surprise us since we do not generally think that graphically about the ritual of baptism. But the design of the ritual of baptism, designed to mirror that of Jesus’ baptism, is crafted to mirror for us the passage under with Jesus into death to then rise up with Christ to new life. In our Anglican/Episcopal tradition we may be simply sprinkled with the water of baptism. But whether baptized by water sprinkled from a font or we are dunked in a river there is a much more graphic reality that is mirrored in the ritual. It is the image of drowning and of “burial” – a deep dive below the surface of life into physical death with Jesus. Then the experience of being raised with him after all into life beyond the experience of death. Raised with Jesus beyond death into resurrected, redeemed life. Thus, Jesus’ death becomes the pivotal image, the crux of our redemption into a larger life. And this is the amazing “grace” to which Paul refers.

The ancient Hebrew idea of purification and cleansing is also an important concept here within the idea of baptism as the word “sin” is woven throughout Paul’s talk of old life into newness of life through baptism. He talks about being enslaved to sin. Of course, he is probably remembering his life before his road to Damascus experience. His life, enslaved to old ways of thinking and acting that denied the way of life that Christ manifested (showed, lived, exhibited) during his earthly life. And Paul didn’t just deny that way of life Jesus’ life offers, a way designed to be true to and aligned with the Divine purpose for all of life. Paul was also at the heart of the movement bent to terminate the movement known as the “Way” that Christ offered as a way of life and to eliminate those who followed it. If sin involves those ways of living and being that stand in the way of the Divine will for life as offered in the life of Christ, then Paul before his conversion was an example of one enslaved by sin. The old way of life for Paul died on the road to Damascus. Blinded, he was raised to new sight and a new way of life when he reached Damascus and was baptized to become a Christ follower along a Divine Way – cleansed of old ways that had enslaved him. A cleansing to lead to freedom: like the enslaved Israelites moving through the Red Sea to the opposite shore that would initiate their journey to the Promised land. Freed to move forward into new life waiting for them according to God’s Divine purpose and will for their lives.

The idea of a before and after way of life during our earthly lifetime is so generously explored by some of our contemporary theologians. Richard Rohr, the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) and CAC's "Living School" is one I have studied and found so life enriching during the past several years as I studied his writings (based so often on the writings of earlier theologians and mystics over the centuries) and as a participant in the two year study program of the CAC Living School.

Rohr in very down to earth and understandable language offers ways to consider the "old self/new self" conversation that I believe Paul offers us in his first century letter to early Christians. Rohr speaks of the "false self" with which we have clothed ourselves for various reasons as we live in, relate with, and try to adapt to the world around us. A false self which accumulates as a result of unhealthy (as opposed to healthy) responses of our ego. A true self which is essentially the core of who we were Divinely inspired and created to become – one which can lullaby an ego into peace and harmony with Divine purpose. I humbly and honestly admit that I may not be stating the false self/true self concepts consistent with the way Rohr wrote and taught his readers and students to think about and understand those concepts. But it's the best I can do at the moment given what I have read and heard and seen woven in the context of my experiences with my own life and the life experience of those I believe God has put in my path to share this earthly journey.

There are simply ways of living, moving and having being in old ways of life that enslave us, that imprison us from connection to and fuller relationship with our true selves. Perhaps out of fear or other primal emotions that are not essentially "bad" or unhealthy, but which can motivate us towards patterns of behavior that diminish us and those around us when we act in fear driven less healthy ways to the events in life so many of which we can't control. Even when we want to live differently, more free in more healthy, life giving ways, while our old self, fearful of change and the unknown retreats or remains stuck in what is familiar even if unhealthy. It is risky to embrace the unknown, to change, to strike out in new territory, unclothed from the familiar.

And so, we come full circle, back to Paul's message and the idea of transitioning from old life to a newness to life. And the stark reality that what he is talking about is death: a living death, scary as that idea is. Living death as a passage time if we move through it offers the graced gift of a resurrected, redeemed, larger, more abundant new way of life on the other side of the passage. To reach a new larger way of living and being it appears we must let go of some of our old ways, and grab hold of the new. Like a trapeze artist swinging into space on one rung, before letting go and grabbing hold of one swinging towards her, there is a gap time and open space that must be bridged. It is a bridge through, not simply over, troubled space, troubled air, troubled waters.

In the right here, right now world we are living in today, we are finding we have been thrust into an arc that is swinging us forward. Old platforms we have been standing on are behind us as we are swinging through a strange space of uncertainty. In a way, old platforms upon which we have been relying for safety and stability seem to be giving way, not necessarily a good choice for return. We are in an uncertain gap time and space and wondering what if any safety net sways below us. As an unseen deadly virus has forced us to give up what we considered normal ways of living. As the

unseen deadly virus of distrust, hatred, domination and supremacy ways of relating to “others” in our life is disassembling old societal and institutional platforms.

My guess is that we will not be able to “return” to some of the old platforms of living as we knew them. They are falling away, the divide between the old and the new has been so profoundly disturbed, too deep a chasm formed between where we were and where we are headed. However, the question becomes what we will build as we reach new territory. Will we simply try to reconstruct the same old platforms we relied upon before, resurrect old ways that were unhealthy, false to the truth of Divine purpose for all – ways that enslaved life rather than freeing it? Will we build upon the shifting sands of fear? Or will we search for and locate rock upon which to build, a true foundation based on Divine purpose and love? It will be risky. Some fears, some things will need to die to find and live into new healthier life that waits for us on the other side. Remembering, that nothing can separate us from the freeing love of God, even death. Remembering that the “do not fear” message of the larger realm we call heaven, not hell, is to offer us courage, heart-strength, to receive the gift of grace to understand that there’s nothing to fear but fear itself. And that Christ offers us the way through that fear.

*Onward . . . into new life . . . letting go of the fear . . . by amazing Grace . . . may it be so!*

*Torrence*