

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 10.21.18, Galatians 2:15-21, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17, 2 Peter 1:1-4

When Jesus rises from the grave and appears to his disciples, they are amazed to have him back with them, because he had died on a cross, and they didn't really believe his prophecies that he would return. But, I imagine they were a little let down when, after they've gotten him back, he announces well, actually he's only going to be with them a little while, and then he'll ascend to rule over all of heaven and earth. I mean, sure that's good news for heaven and earth, but what about these disciples? They'll be on their own again, trying to share his message, but without him there.

So, the question for the early church was essentially our same question today: how do we do this, how do we share the good news, the message of Jesus Christ, how do we live his pattern and walk in his way and help bring about his reign—without him here?

And there is a lot of romanticizing of the early church, how pure and idyllic it was, and I mean I guess it was nice not to have some of the worries we have today, but trust me, the early church was not calm and sweet and perfect. Jesus ascends, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit, and then almost immediately divisions and difficulties begin in the early church. For instance, there are the problems alluded to our Galatians passage, about the differences between Jewish believers and Gentile believers, the keeping of the law among Christians; issues regarding the Lord's Supper and how some people used it as a way to separate and divide the church; issues over church members treating one another as lesser believers because of differences in spiritual gifts and class and status. And that's just a few things they fought about.

And in the midst of all that mess, they're supposed to be sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. But Jesus isn't here, bodily, for them to appeal to. So they're divided and they're treating each other poorly, and it's not reflecting well on their message or their Lord.

Now, a couple of weeks ago, we heard the verse from Romans 3, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And that was a good reminder to us, and to the early church—they are the same in sin, it is the great equalizer. But the rest of the verse: “they are now justified by God's grace”, told them that they are also connected in grace. And, as we heard last week, that grace has fundamentally changed them, set them on a new road, put them in a new place, and so now, they have good works to do that come from grace instead of sin.

But the early church, and we, too, needed the reminder that grace and good works don't earn anything. They don't set you apart as a believer, they don't make you higher or better than other believers, they don't give you permission to look down on folks, or treat anybody badly. These good works come from the grace of Jesus Christ. These good works are a way to represent what Jesus has done for you, who you are in Jesus Christ. These good works are a way of spreading his message, even though he's not here.

So, in our passages today, we hear about how Jesus lives in them. Galatians says: for it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. 2 Peter says the goal for believers is to become participants in the divine nature. 2 Thessalonians says the goal is for believers to obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace has made them someone new, they have been crucified with Christ, and so their lives represent him, their good works represent him—his life, his divine nature, his glory. Everything good they do, everything that comes from grace and good works, represents Jesus, not themselves.

Now, Paul is very clear in Galatians, and it's worth repeating his point, that any sinfulness on the part of those in whom Christ lives does not make Jesus party to sin. We are not yet perfected. But we've been put on the right road to get there. The sin does not represent Jesus, it represents our continued brokenness. But it also shows his grace. And the gracious parts of our lives, the good works that come from it, they represent Jesus Christ living in us, they show his divine nature to the world, even though he is not here bodily. They show that we are part of a divine nature and that we do not have to be confined to our worst selves, if we will choose it.

I know I've told you this before, but just bear with me, as I use it yet again. But in college, I sang in our college choir, and during spring break and various Sunday mornings, we would travel and perform. And my director would remind us that "To these people, you ARE Presbyterian College". Meaning conduct yourself, behave yourself, speak to these people, treat these people, in a way that reflects the college. Because they don't attend classes, they don't know everything else about the school, and you are it. You are what they will remember about Presbyterian College.

It is not longer we who live, but it is Christ who lives in us. To other people, if we claim to be Christians, then, in a way, we are Jesus Christ. We represent him. He lives in us, and we participate in his divine nature, we seek to obtain his glory, not our own. We represent him in this world.

Like my choir director say, we were not just ourselves, we represented the college; we are not just ourselves, we represent Jesus Christ. Christ lives in us, so we are not confined to our worst selves and can make some different and better decisions than our sinful natures would suggest. We represent Jesus Christ to other church members, other believers, other people.

But sometimes when we say Jesus Christ lives in me, we are representing him, we think it means we all have to be uniform and the same, or that we have to fake it, that the Lord has asked us to tamp down our unique personality or sense of humor or specific aspects of our lives, and if we can't, then to just pretend, to be like surface-level Jesus. And that's not good either, and I don't think it's what that passage means. For it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives *in me*. And the life *I* now live *in the flesh*, I live by faith in the the son of God. Christ lives in me, in the unique person I am, the personality and sense of humor and habits and place in this world and people I know. The life I live in the flesh is where the son of God lives, the life I live in the flesh is where I represent him. The beauty of the ascension, that Jesus is not confined to one body anymore, but lives in each believer, is that it means Jesus is represented in a variety of ways, a variety of people, skin colors, genders, ethnicities, communities, customs, habits and personalities. We represent him, ultimately, with any grace or good works, but we do so in our lives, in our unique selves.

And having Christ live in us gives us permission to respond to other people, the way he would. It gives permission to forgive other people when they hurt us, to let go of things that are done and no longer part of our journey, to not judge people who are different from us, to look with kindness on other people, to demand justice for other people, to work for better things in this world, because that is the way of Jesus Christ, and he is living in us. I'm sure we all know about the "what would Jesus do" bracelets, and that's a good question to ask, but an even better question is if Jesus Christ is living in me, what do I do? If Jesus Christ is living in me, how do I respond in this situation? If Jesus Christ is living in me, how do I treat this person?

And the apostle Paul in Galatians, and in his other letters, accepts the reality that we are not perfect yet, that we will continue to sin, his point is that it doesn't

reflect Jesus, who was sinless. But when we continue to sin, and when we show no remorse or regret or sorrow, when we refuse to see the things we have done or said as wrong, and when we do not repent, do not even try to change our ways, it only reflects on us, but it belies Jesus' message, it makes what he did in our lives false, it cheapens his grace. And because we have claimed to be Christians, and say we are representing him, it hurts other people's view of him, whether we mean to or not. We don't want that. And not because we're trying to earn his favor, or prove that we're worthy, or get points for our salvation, because we don't need to. It's because we wouldn't want to do that.

Think of someone that you admire, that you want to be like. I've heard people say if I am half as good a parent as my parents were, I'll be all right, or I really looked up to my grandmother, she was such a woman of faith, or I had the most wonderful teacher, he really inspired me. Someone who you value their legacy, you cared about not disappointing them and carrying on their values, someone you want to live like they did, not because it will earn you anything, but because you think it's worth it, because you think it's a good way to live, because you want to reflect that person in your life. That's the idea of Galatians, of Christ living in us. We want to repent of old ways, and turn from sin, and keep trying to do better, not because it's earning us something, but because he's someone worth representing well. His life is a way we want to live, we want to reflect him in our lives. We care about his legacy, we want to carry on his values, we think living like him is worth it for us and other people.

But I know it's a daunting prospect to think that Jesus is living in us, we are supposed to be representing Jesus, and our worst parts may truly only come from us, but that other people may read them as representing Jesus, I know that's a lot. In fact, it gave me pause, preparing this sermon, and knowing some of the burdens we in our congregation are carrying, it worried me to think of adding one more,

like I know all you have to carry, and oh also make sure you are living just exactly like our perfect Lord!

It's a lot to require. And we are not there yet. We are not at perfection. We are going to sin, and be unkind, and slight one another, we are going to do things that do not come from a Christly nature, which come only from our worst selves.

So, it's worth remembering, as our passages said, that we have been given comfort and good hope, we have been given precious faith and peace and promises, and we have been given grace. That's already a lot to help us on our way. And not only that, as 2 Peter said, we have been given everything needed for life and godliness. We face a challenge, and we have a lot to live up to, but we have been given everything needed to get there one day.

It reminds me of the final episode of the show *Gilmore Girls*, where Lorelei, the mother is preparing to send her daughter Rory off across the country for her first big post-college job. And as they're gathering luggage and getting ready to leave, Lorelei starts fretting over all the things she hasn't given or told to Rory—does she want these sunglasses, this sweater, does she know where to sit on the bus, advice about first impressions and work tips. As she starts winding up, Rory keeps trying to interrupt her, saying “Mom, mom, mom”. Finally, Lorelei pauses her spiel, and Rory says, “You've given me everything I need”, and she goes off in to the world.

We have a lot to live up to, the legacy of an amazing Savior to represent, but he has given us everything we need for life and godliness. In order to do this, to live this life, to represent him, we have to believe that, we have to faith in that.

And I do find that a lot of sin, a lot of unkindness, a lot of the worst things we do come from a feeling of lack. The feeling that we don't have what we need. I don't feel like I have enough, I am afraid, so I become greedy or stingy or suspicious of every request. I don't feel like I have enough status or value, I feel angry

about it, so I start to treat other people as less, I try to devalue and keep other people down, I belittle other people to keep them less valued than me. I feel like I don't have what will be required to face the future, so I freeze up and lose faith and refuse any change. I feel like I don't have attention and support, so I refuse to extend help to anyone else, etc. etc.

But if we know, if we have faith that we have everything we need for life and godliness, everything we need to meet the challenge of representing Jesus Christ, everything we need to do this work, to live this life, it frees us from that feeling of lack, it frees us from the sinful compulsions which spring from it, it free us in our lives, and free us in how we treat other people. It frees us to respond and act as people who have Jesus Christ living in us.

It is no longer we who live, it is Christ who lives in us. The life we live in the flesh, we live by faith in him. We are representing Jesus with our goodness and grace, he is living in us. We have everything we need to do that, to pursue his divine nature and obtain his glory, to treat other people, other believers as he would have done, to speak his message and share his gifts here on earth.

So, let's live like Christ is living in us and we have everything we need. Let's not live out of our worst selves, our sinful natures, our feeling of lack. Let's live out of hope and promise and peace and grace. Let's live like the divine nature and glory of our Savior. Let's respond to situations and act toward other people as if Christ is living in us, because he is. Let's prove his message true and his life as honest and his ways as worth living by how we live. Let's be people of grace and good works that come from Jesus Christ, let's be people who have our Savior living in us. Amen.