

Alive to God: Romans 6:1-11

Norwalk Christian Church, First Sunday, June 22, 2014

“What then are we to say?” This is the way Paul begins our text this morning, but it is a question that’s been in my head for several months. “What then are we to say?” Or, to put it another way, I just don’t know what to say. It’s not like a preacher to be speechless, and I’m sure I’ll get over it soon, but we are overwhelmed by you, by this place, and by this wonderful church. We don’t know what to say!

We never imagined, in our wildest dreams, six months ago when we began our ministry search that it would lead us so quickly to you. Within days of our deciding to look for a church where Marti and I could minister together, we received an email from Andy Pratt on behalf of the search committee. A week or so later, we were talking to the search committee on the phone, then on Skype, then in person, and then we were here with you, when Marti and I, and all of you, said yes to this new ministry together.

Between then and now, it’s been two long months that have flown by, filled with packing boxes, tearful goodbyes and hellos, and more house selling and buying drama than you probably want to hear about. And I must say, it’s almost too good to be true. What then are we to say, but, “Thank You!” and “We are so very happy and honored to be your pastors.”

There was probably one other Sunday I was speechless. It was about 10 years ago, when I was in seminary. That Sunday, the little church Marti and I served in Abilene was packed, a diverse crowd gathered together to worship and hear a word from the Lord.

After we had sung some hymns, the congregation sat down and the minister stepped into the pulpit, opened his Bible, and just as he was opening his mouth...we heard a voice: “Excuse me. Excuse me. I have something to say. Excuse me. The Lord has given me a word for you this morning.”

He was a large man. A *very* large man. Taller than everyone in the church. He had a snow-white beard and wore a rather large pair of blue-jean overalls...and only a large pair of blue-jean overalls.

This little church was on a busy street, and was used to people occasionally walking in from the street. But until that, no one but the preacher had ever come in with a word from the Lord. As the congregation sat speechless, this big man--did I tell you he was really big?--made his way mumbling down the center aisle, stepped into the chancel, and stood right beside the preacher. Our preacher wasn’t a tall man, but he was a round man, but standing next to our visitor, he looked like Woody Allen standing next to the Rock.

A few of our church members stood up, trying to be brave, but we all agreed that we needed to just let this man say what he wanted to say. He started flipping through his Bible, trembling with the weight of his message. Finally, he stopped at Genesis 3, read a

few verses, muttered some words we couldn't understand, and closed his Bible. And that was it. His word from the Lord had been delivered, and he turned and walked back out the way he came, back to the street, where I'm confident he headed to the next church down the street to share with them his message from the Lord.

I've often wondered if this visitor understood better the weight of preaching than I or many of my preaching colleagues do. Week after week, in countless pulpits across the world, preachers stand up and say, in effect, the same thing this visitor said: "Excuse me. Excuse me. I have something to say. Excuse me. The Lord has given me a word for you this morning."

Perhaps we should tremble this morning as we stand before this word from the Lord. This is a serious message. This is a serious task. And it is a serious calling to preach.

Paul the writer of our letter, was first and foremost a preacher. These letters we read from Paul, they are the sermons Paul would preach to these churches, were he able to visit them in person. He's never met the people in Rome, but he loves them, much like Marti and I loved you even before we met you.

Paul stands in the pulpit today with a word for this church he loves. "The Lord has given me a word for you, this morning!" Paul says. But if he's trembling, you can't tell.

Our English translations don't really do Paul's sermon justice. When I read the NRSV, it sounds so soft and tame. Verse one: "*What then are we to say?*" Paul sounds like an overly proper British royal. I think he's yelling this question, as he feels the full weight of God's word. It's probably not good grammar, but we should include some explanation points, along with the question mark. "What then are we to say?!!!" It is an exasperated question.

If the NRSV gets verse one a little wrong, it completely botches verse two. "Should we continue sinning so that grace may abound? By no means." The phrase "By no means" is "by no means" a good translation. One of my favorite moments in college was that day in Greek class when we were studying this very text and learned that in the original language, Paul is so worked up here, he pretty much cusses in Greek. He's not saying, "By no means!" I'll let you image what a better translation might be; I'm not cussing in the pulpit on our first Sunday.

Paul was a pastor, but he was never afraid to speak plain and direct. When Paul is upset, you gonna hear about it. If he's not there to tell you in person, he's going to write it down, and preserve his pastoral anger for centuries to come.

But Paul's not upset because the Romans aren't worshipping right, or because they didn't show up to the bake sale, or aren't tithing like they should. His anger is that of a parent, upset when they see their children not living up to their potential. It's a coach, angry because he knows you can give more than you think you can give. It's the anger of a

pastor, in love with a church she believes is the best church in the world, a church fully planted in the garden of grace, yet a church that lives as if death had the final say.

A couple nights ago, we were having dinner with the Foxes and Durhams, and I told them about the Children's sermon a few Sundays ago at my former church in Abilene. One of our church members brought as her prop a map. In the middle, she had Abilene, Texas, circled, with highlighted routes going from Abilene to other cities like Fort Worth and Oklahoma City. After talking to the kids about all the different ways you could get from Abilene to these much more interesting places, she asked them the serious, church question: "So, kids, do you know how you get to heaven?" And without missing a beat, sweet 5-year-old Mollie Grace yelled out, "You have to die!"

The correct answer was "Jesus"... that's always the right answer in a Children's Sermon... but you know, I think Paul would've liked Mollie Grace's answer. Now, Paul's not really one of those evangelistic preachers, always talking about what you need to do to get to some afterlife destination called "heaven". Paul's most interested in his church experiencing Heaven, the Kingdom of God, in the here and now. On earth, as it is in heaven. But before you can experience this new life, there must be death.

To truly live, your old self, encumbered by selfishness and greed, needs to die. Your need to always be right, to always have it all figured out, to always trust in your own power--needs to die. To truly live, you must crucify your drive for perfection. To truly live, you must put fear to death.

Reading over Paul's sermon, it seems the Christians in Rome have the death part all figured out. Like a lot of church folk I know, they know that death is part of the Christian life. It's the living part they struggle with. You talk to them and everything is "Woe is me!" They live life with a martyr's complex, a Debbie Downer for the Lord. If you need to know what is wrong with the church, they'll tell you.

The church is dying, they say! Attendance is down. Young folks aren't coming to church like they're used to. Giving is down. The building needs work. The community is changing. The music isn't what it used to be. And nobody appreciates all I do around here.

But that's not how you are, is it? I think you get it. You're not a church focused on death. Marti and I could tell right away--this church is alive to God! We see life all around this place! This is an exciting time to be in Norwalk, and to be at this church.

This is a new chapter in this church's life. But new is not always easy. If you haven't realized it yet, you will soon enough: Marti and I, we're not like your previous pastors. We don't even *own* a bow tie! We will do things differently. We will see things differently. Like all change, we will take some getting used to.

Change requires patience. It requires letting go of some old things so we can embrace the new things. Or, in the language of Paul, for the new to be born, there's always some old things that need to die.

Were Paul preaching to you this morning instead of me, he'd probably put it frank, and might he'd even cuss a little. He might come off a bit intimidating, like the man who visited our church in Abilene: "The Lord has given me a word for you this morning! Stop acting like you're dying! You've been buried with Christ in baptism! You've already died! Now get over it, and start living your new life!"

But Paul's not preaching to you today, I am. And the view from where we're standing makes it clear: you are a church that is alive to God!

That's why you've poured out your money and your time to build a new cabin at the Christian Conference Center, a cabin that has already blessed the youth of this region, who you know are our church's present and future.

You are alive to God! That's why you drive the church bus to the elementary school every week to pick up Dinky Disciples and JYF kids, so that they can know the love that God and this church has for them.

You are alive to God! That's why you not only have a banner hanging outside these doors that declares to all who enter, "All are welcome!", but you live it out, too. You're willing to ask the hard questions, to ensure that everyone is welcome at Christ's table, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey.

You are alive to God! That's why you share your lives together. That's why you help the new ministers move in and cut their trees, mow their lawn, and pressure wash their house. That's why you cook for the soap box derby, have craft fairs to raise funds for ministry, and throw festivals and picnics for the community.

You are alive to God That's why our family is here. And that's why you're here. Because this is the church that welcomed you and loved you, just as you are. This is your home.

I don't know what all God has ahead of us in our new life together, but whatever it is, it's going to be good. Death has no power over us. We've died to death. And we've been raised to new life!

And as we begin our new life together, I have a word of the Lord for you: "Beautiful People of Norwalk Christian Church: I love you. I am proud of you. You have an exciting future ahead of you. And there's nothing holding you back. You've already died to those things. Now it's time to step forward in faith and courage, and live!"

This is a word of the Lord. Thanks be to our God. Amen.