

“Whatever the Day Brings”

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Text: Romans 8:11-17

If the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. 12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- 13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

It is a glorious day, a day for rejoicing—a day to worship God and to be thankful. We celebrate the mercies of God that have sustained you graduates and your families through your time here, and for the presence and power of God that will uphold you in your future work of ministry. I am so pleased to be able to share in this moment and I thank you members of the class of '08 for this opportunity.

Baptism is a joyful image and so an appropriate one for this day. It is a joyful image because it causes us to ponder the miracle of new life in Christ. Think for a moment of a baptism you have witnessed: it was a moment of celebration, a moment affirming God's grace acting on our behalf

and the claim of God’s love upon us. You and the church were expressing a conviction that *something* in the life of the baptized person had changed. New possibilities had been claimed. I love the baptism scene in the film *Tender Mercies*. Robert Duvall’s character, Mac Sledge, is a down and out alcoholic living in the barren land of west Texas. He is a has-been writer of country western songs. Then the young widow Rosa Lee and her nine-year-old boy, Sonny, take Mac into their home, and slowly, their nurturing acceptance of Mac steals him away from the forces that have nearly destroyed him. He is set free. You can see his quiet happiness. Rosa Lee and Mac marry. One day Sonny and Mac are baptized. Afterward on the ride home, Sonny says to Mac, “Well, we done it, Mac—we’re baptized.” Mac says, “Yeah, we are.” Sonny says, “Everybody said I was going to feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different, but I don’t feel a whole lot different—do you?” Mac says, “Not yet.” Sonny looks in the rear-view mirror of the truck. “Do I look any different?” Mac says, “Not yet.” But it doesn’t really matter whether we *feel* anything different, or whether we *look* any different. Baptism isn’t about changes in emotions or appearance but about our trusting that the God who raised Christ to new life will give new life to us as well—new life in the age to come, but also new life here and now.

The new life is possible because Jesus has attained victory over the forces that imprison us and destroy us. He attained his victory through his own death, and in baptism we are united with him in that death. Thus our new life comes about because of a death—Jesus’ death, in which as Christians we share. But death couldn’t hold Jesus, and it can’t hold us, either. This abstract argument is easier to follow if we think of medieval art that depicts Jesus’ descent into hell. In these images, Jesus’ typically treads on a serpent or the devil, who signifies the power of death. This figure is completely overcome by Jesus—it is unable to rise up to keep Jesus imprisoned or

to halt his liberation of the captives. Christ conquered death, and through our solidarity with him in baptism we do, also.

When we die with Christ, Paul says, we put to death the deeds of the body and choose instead to be led by the Spirit of God. I think Paul means that when we let the Spirit lead us, we die to all the idols to which we gave our allegiance before. We die to the false god of power and control. We die also to the god of money, the god of thinness and good looks, the god of prestige and honor, the god of anger and hatred, the god of jealousy, the god of worry, the god of fear, the god of shame, the god of despair. Above all we die to that greatest of the fallen principalities and powers, the idolatrous power of Death. None of these idols has control over us anymore. We are led by the love of Christ, the Spirit of Christ.

And if we are led by the Spirit, Paul says, then we are indeed God’s children. In our passage for today he writes, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

Perhaps we can imagine, as some scholars suggest, that this cry, “Abba! Father,” was the Spirit-filled cry of the ancient believer as she emerged from the waters of baptism. For it is in baptism that we become Abraham’s offspring and fellow heirs of the promises of God along with our brother Jesus.

But there is a dark and somber note in the midst of all this joy. Did you notice? Did you notice how Paul ends our passage? He writes that we are joint heirs of Christ, *if in fact we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*. Why must Paul inject this note of sorrow into his celebration of our baptismal adoption as children of God? The reason is that Paul recognizes that the power of death is not yet undone. Oh, to be sure, through Christ we are empowered to walk in newness of life. And certainly, “if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall also be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Nonetheless, the power of death is still operative in our fallen world. Death is still working through all the icons, ideologies, and institutions that structure our daily lives— icons, ideologies, and institutions that demand that we give our homage to them instead of to the God of life. One can see evidence of this continuing reign of death in a thousand places: not only where age, disease, accident, natural disaster, or famine wrest away lives, but anywhere that stronger powers exploit the weak by dint of physical threat or denial of a person’s essential humanity and worth, or anywhere that some lesser power has gained the status of a god in peoples’ lives.

In *Tender Mercies*, after his baptism, the power of death re-invades Mac’s life. Mac’s teenage daughter from a previous marriage is killed in a car accident. Mac is devastated. He says, “I never did trust happiness, and I never will.” The power of death was not content to leave Mac alone, and it will not leave us alone, either. It is important to understand that the jurisdiction of this tyrannical power of death is much larger than the biological sphere in which bodies die. The power of death encompasses *all* the forces that oppress, bind, corrupt, alienate, segregate, divide, and destroy humans in their relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation.¹

As ministers and counselors, you will come to know the suffering that for Christians is the undercurrent in all our joy. You will share in the suffering of those whom you serve: suffering that they experience when their loved ones die, when their marriages fail, when they find themselves caught in addictions of various sorts, when they struggle against illnesses and afflictions, when they face their own deaths. And you will know suffering of your own, including not only these sorts but also the suffering that is the special province of ones who minister: suffering when your people make impossible demands on you, when they fail to heed your offer of God’s grace to them, when they reject your prophetic preaching or your sage counsel, when they convey to you that you are among them but not one of them, when you find yourself holding out your hands all day long to a disobedient and contrary people. As ministers and counselors, you must expect suffering to come. It will come.

But there is a promise of victory. There is hope, there are signs of new life, and there is joy—*even in the midst of our suffering*—because we are united with one who has overcome these forces of death that labor so mightily to impair our ministry and undercut our work for Christ. The act of baptism marks our choice to live in the power of life instead of the power of death. In this event we claim that the presence and power of God overwhelm the presence and power of death in our own existence.² Mac suffers when his daughter dies, and we can assume that his life will hold more suffering still. But the very last scene of the film makes us understand that Mac will also know joy. God’s tender mercies are sufficient for him, and they will be sufficient for you.

Your vocation, as baptized persons, is to live in the knowledge of Christ’s victory. William Stringfellow wrote, “The vocation of the baptized person is a simple thing: it is to live from day to day, whatever the day brings, in this extraordinary unity, in this reconciliation with all persons and all things, in this knowledge that death has no more power, in this truth of the Resurrection. It does not really matter what [you as] a Christian [do] from day to day. What matters is that in whatever [you do, you do it] in honor of the triumph of Christ over death and, therefore, in honor of [your] own life, given to [you] by God and restored to [you] in Christ, in honor of the life into which all persons and all things are called. The only thing that really matters is to live in Christ instead of death.”³

Whatever the day brings—does it bring joy? Live in the truth of the resurrection. Whatever the day brings—does it bring new life, new hope, new fellowship, new brothers and sisters in Christ? Live in honor of the triumph of Christ over death. Whatever the day brings—does it bring sorrow or pain or rejection? Live in honor of your own life, given to you by God and restored to you in Christ. Whatever the day brings—does it bring death, your own or that of one whom you love? Live in honor of the life abundant and the eternal life into which all persons and all things are called. Whatever the day brings, brothers and sisters, live in Christ instead of death.

(Closing prayer.) Let us pray. God of life, we rejoice that in Christ you have set us free from the forces that bind us, the forces that press us down, the forces that segregate and alienate us from one another and from you. We rejoice in the power of life which overwhelms the power of death in our existence. We rejoice that you have claimed each one of us as your own, and marked us with your love. Help us to live into our freedom, O God—the freedom that always accompanies

your Spirit. Remind us that we have not received a spirit of slavery, but a spirit of adoption.

Remind us that we are your beloved children and that, whatever the day brings, we need not fear.

Help us to live in hope of your promise of shared glory. May others see that glory reflected in us even now. Amen.

NOTES

¹William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (New and expanded edition; New York: Seabury, 1976), 112.

²*Ibid.*, 107.

³*Ibid.*, 112.