

... present yourselves to God

Genesis 22:1–14

Psalm 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

Text: Romans 6:13-14

... but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Introduction

Do you purchase electronic editions of books? I like to hold a book in my hands to read but I have moved a little into the electronic world of buying and reading books. Once you do that you are bound to be sent electronic notifications of other books you might like to own. A few weeks ago, during days of staying home, I received a notification suggesting that I might like to read one of “Margaret Atwood’s dystopian masterpieces.” I was not in the mood for ‘dystopian’ anything. ‘Dystopian’ refers to an imagined world or society in which people lead dehumanized, fearful lives; it is an antonym for ‘utopian.’ Dealing with Corona virus was dehumanizing and fearful enough for me.

I was under the impression that when companies sent advertisements for future purchasing possibilities, they did so based on your past purchasing choices. I bought a Bible, theology and philosophy books, even a couple of Bible commentaries; nothing ‘dystopian,’ at least in my view. Perhaps it was a suggestion to expand my horizons a little? Whatever the case, enough of my whining!

1. When the Apostle Paul writes to believers calling them to “present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life,” the life we have been brought into is that great future Jesus Christ has decisively inaugurated when he gave up his life for us and was then raised to the life that is now ours in him. For Paul, the life believers are to live into now, envisions the redemption of the entire creation. In speaking of the future glory of this life the believer has been brought into, the Apostle Paul writes, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Dare I say, ‘utopian masterpiece?’

To be sure, there is a ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ to this life we are to live into. When Jesus said on the cross, ‘it is finished’ he meant the battle with sin and death had been won; the new age has begun. We don’t see its final consummation yet, but the outcome is not in doubt. We live with a foot in both worlds—this one of mortality and decay and that new world of life eternal. A foot in both worlds but our weight is not evenly distributed—we shift our weight on to the foot in the world of our Lord’s love and perpetual light. The writer Ann Lamott put it this way; “Grace means you’re in a different universe from where you had been stuck, when you had absolutely no way to get there on your own.”

When the Apostle Paul speaks of the life we have been brought into by Christ Jesus, it includes everything the gospel witnesses about that glorious future when love will only give way to more love. The future when our Lord will wipe every tear from our eyes, and death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more; virus and dystopia will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” Presenting ourselves to God, living in obedience to Jesus Christ, is to live there now; is to shift our weight to our foot planted in that kingdom. To live the self-forgetful, self-giving love of Christ towards one another, is to live in this dominion of grace now.

2. In characterizing what it means to ‘present yourselves to God and to present your members as instruments of righteousness,” Paul writes, “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” I am aware that Paul’s use of the image of slavery is problematic for many hearing it today. Our surrounding culture of individualism has an ethos that holds up the authentic and liberated self as the ideal of character; a sensibility of the self as a unique and creative spirit whose reason for existence is its own expression. This talk of slavery contradicts such cultural conviction.

Added to that is the negative reaction to the word ‘sin.” The choice Paul presents of “sin which leads to death” and “obedience, which leads to righteousness” sounds alien to a culture committed to individualism. Talk of sin was rendered unfashionable by the self-confident secularism of our society. Our society worships the myth of progress (and the myth of progress is the mirage that North Americans chase) believing that it is getting better and better. We shall progress, we are told, only as we jettison such antiquated encumbrances as the notion of sin.

Biblically speaking sin, at bottom, is as simple as it is dreadful: sin is simply telling God to “buzz off.” The telling may be explicit and conscious. More often, in fact nearly always, it is implicit and disguised because unconscious. It makes no difference. God is told to get lost. He claims us for himself. We say, “Leave me alone.” He insists that he wants only our blessing, and the obedience he wants from us will prove to be our blessing. We reply, “Everywhere else in life obedience is something we have to render, a boss we can’t stand. Why should we think you are different?” He grounds his claim upon us in his love for us. We say, “I didn’t ask for your love. Furthermore, I resent your love; it’s an intrusion; I want my life to be mine.” The root Sin (and the fountain of all concrete sins) is a self-important, proud posture of defiance, of rejection, of disdain and disobedience. The posture pretends to be a sophisticated looking past God born of a presumed self-sufficiency without God. Our self-sufficiency, however, is only a sad figment of our imagination, and our innocent sophistication in fact culpable contempt.

Do you find this a bit of a downer? According to the gospel the most optimistic thing to be said of any of us is that we are sinners. If we don’t say that we are sinners then what expression are we going to use to describe, ultimately explain, our sense that the world is not all it could be, that I am not all I could be? Are we going to say that humankind is sick? If humankind as a whole is sick, then are there some among us who are considerably less sick than the rest and can therefore “cure” everyone else? The history of the world tells us otherwise. Instead of regarding humankind as sick maybe we should regard ourselves as socially maladjusted. To speak of ourselves as socially maladjusted, however, is to invite social engineering. In any scheme of

social engineering the “engineers,” the “answer” people, will insist upon the right to enforce their social solutions. They can only put us on the road to totalitarianism.

The safest thing to say, because the truest thing to say, is also the most optimistic thing to say: we are sinners. To acknowledge that I am a sinner isn't to say that this is the way it was supposed to be, as if it is human nature. We are sinners but we were never meant to be. To say that we are sinners now is to say that we have falsified ourselves somehow, but by God's grace we can recover our true identity. We can recover what we were made to be. Our capsized situation can be turned right side up. Most gloriously, it can all begin now. And that is why it is optimistic to speak of humankind as sinner. Under God we can begin our journey toward the destination to which we've been appointed, from death to life.

3. I note that the Apostle Paul does not say ‘as if’. “Present yourselves to God as (not ‘as if’ you are) those who have been brought from death to life. For the believer, the reality of our existence is new life in Christ and our response is to live in this reality. Keep in mind that Paul's theology is grounded in the Older Testament story of God calling his people Israel. Paul is convinced that in Christ Jesus the faithfulness of God to all the biblical promises are fulfilled. And when he speaks of being brought from death into life, from the reign of one dominion into another, the story of the Exodus shapes his imagination. As Israel was brought from slavery into the freedom of God's sovereign care so too God has freed us from the dominion of sin and brought us into the freedom of life in obedience to Jesus Christ.

If this is our reality—new life in Christ—why doesn't it occur without effort? Just as Israel was freed and needed to learn how to live in that freedom, so do we. A slave who gained their freedom in the Roman Empire may have been free on the day of declared emancipation; what is ahead for them is learning all that it means to live as a free citizen. The point I raise with you is that Paul believes this life is reality and therefore possible. He does not think you have to wait for the next life. It begins now. And all that is lived in that direction is never denigrated nor trashed, but preserved and perfected for that future kingdom. As Jesus said, “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’

4. I invite you to think with me a little further on presenting ourselves to God. The Greek word translated ‘present’ has the idea of placing a thing or a person at someone's disposal. Paul unpacks what he means when he says that this placing at God's disposal means obedience. Obedience in Greek is a compound word, composed of the preposition ‘under’ and a noun that comes from the verb ‘I hear.’ Thus, to be obedient is to hear what is said and to place one's self underneath the authority of what is heard. In speaking of Jesus Christ earlier in his Romans letter, Paul said it was through Jesus' obedience that the many will be made righteous.

I note that in the gospel story there is only one totally free person, freedom meaning that nothing constrains him from being who he truly is. Do you recall Jesus on trial before Pilate. Pilate was a little perturbed when Jesus refused to answer Pilate's question, “Where are you from?” Finally, Pilate threatens Jesus, ‘Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?’ Pilate threatens him with death. This is when Jesus responds, ‘You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above;

therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.’ That is what really shook up Pilate. And yet Jesus was obedient to the point of death, even on a cross. Obedience and freedom are not opposites. Perhaps the question we can hear in our era, rather than ‘whose slave are you’ is ‘to whom do you belong?’

This presenting of ourselves to God includes ‘presenting your members to God as instruments of righteousness.’ This is set in opposition to ‘presenting your members to sin as instruments of wickedness.’ Paul is speaking about not letting “sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.” Why does Paul press this point? Then, as now, there were philosophies that understood the human as having a ‘soul’ rather than the Biblical understating of being a soul. A sharp distinction was made between the physical and spiritual; the body was thought the temporal part and the soul as eternal. Thus, many concluded, it does not matter what you do in or with our body.

Paul insists otherwise. Jesus Christ was raised bodily from the dead and the redemption that is in Christ Jesus includes everything. God comes among us in Jesus of Nazareth therefore the human body is a fit vehicle for God. It is from this understanding that Paul insists that we present all of ourselves to God. The word translated ‘members’ in ‘present your members to God’, is not simply limbs, but various faculties of the mortal body. The word translated ‘instruments’, in ‘as instruments of righteousness’ was a word used to mean a ship’s tackle, or tools, instruments of any kind, and can also mean ‘weapons’ as the King James Bible renders it. A ship’s tackle was used for setting the course to the destination of a journey; set your sails to the wind of God. Instruments of a trade serve the purpose of the trade as do weapons for an army. We bring all that we are to this life in Christ Jesus.

4. Karl Barth is widely regarded as the twentieth century’s greatest theologian. I love his passion for bringing every thought and practise captive to the logic of the gospel; the pursuit that everything be shaped by the wonderful glory of the gospel. Barth said this of the gospel’s assertion of our condition before God; “The illusion that we can rid ourselves of our illusions ourselves is the greatest of all illusions.”

We have made this observation before that the only reason we can turn to Jesus Christ in faith is because God first turned towards us. And having turned towards us in the Son, God never turns away, never abandons. Our love for God is out of the overflow of his love flooding our hearts. From the foundation of the world, God chose to be for us.

We read today the story of God calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; it is a disturbing story on many levels. I am not sure that any of us can completely fathom this story; some aspects are beyond our knowing. The point I note here is that the Apostle Paul references this story when he says of God’s saving grace, “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” In the Abraham story Isaac is spared. In the gospel story Father and Son are not spared such agony. It is God’s love, in which God holds nothing back for our sakes, that is the motivation to present ourselves to God.

...present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life. Amen.