

PENTECOST 4, A – June 28, 2020
SCRIPTURES – Ps. 89; Jer. 28:5-9; Rom. 7:1-13; Matt. 10:34-42

You have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to Him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. Rom. 7:4-6



These recent weeks of unrest have been difficult ones in our country. Many statues and monuments have vandalized or destroyed. A recent focus of attention is the Emancipation Statue in Washington, D.C. It depicts Pres. Lincoln, hand on his 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, freeing a shackled slave who is kneeling before him. Paid for solely by freed slaves, it was dedicated in 1876 with a speech by Frederick Douglass, a friend of Lincoln who had been a slave. And yet, there are those who want this statue removed. Why? Some don't care about reasons but simply want to tear down and destroy. The full force of government, to which God has given the power of the sword, should be brought against them. Such people need to be controlled by force. Others want it removed because it was designed by a white man, and so they see it as a symbol of white supremacy. Maybe they should offer to pay for a new statue and for moving the current one to the Lincoln Memorial. This would respect both the law and the beliefs of those who erected the statue.

Today, in this time of lawlessness, we consider the law; especially, God's Law. How are we to respond to it? What do God's Commandments say to us, who believe in Jesus? Paul, in the 7th chapter of his letter to the Romans, speaks to this.

Paul points out a sad fact: the Law doesn't really work for us. It doesn't lead to righteousness, but arouses sinful desires in us: ***"our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death."*** You see this very clearly when you see the mere presence of police officers causing some to react with angry shouts and threats of violence. Now, this is not us, of course. We Christians are much calmer and more respectful. We know that opposing, or even ignoring, the law only brings down judgment. But, the law, even God's Law, works to arouse sin in us, too. You feel this when a police car shows up in your rear-view mirror. You immediately slow down.... were you speeding? You hope he doesn't turn on his lights. Perhaps you grumble: *"Why don't they go after the guy who went flying by a few minutes ago?"* Sinful passions like anger, judgment, and self-justification are aroused in us all by the law. Laws are created to control sin, but they end up revealing our sin.

Sometimes, our sin is subtle. Jeremiah was opposed by a prophet who spoke comforting words to the people. *“The Babylonians who invaded and defeated us will be overthrown, and our king, who was carried off into captivity, will return!”* he said. *“And Jeremiah’s prophecy of complete destruction will turn not come true!”* We all like to hear comforting words, and not threats or condemnation. We like to avoid conflict, especially in church. And so, churches, pastors, and people are tempted to avoid Biblical passages and teachings with which they don’t agree. Some even reinterpret them and change their meaning to make them more palatable. But, the Lord doesn’t speak only peace. He clearly points out sin and warns of the consequences of disobedience. His Law condemns us all. Dodging or ignoring this doesn’t change this.

When God’s Law condemns you as a sinner, your hope is Christ’s promise: ***“The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.”*** Listen to those who proclaim God’s truth and turn from your sin! God will have mercy. He will forgive you and be with you to help and strengthen you to stand against temptation and sin, as he did for the prophets of old, like Jeremiah.

Above all, keep your focus upon the greatest prophet of all: our Lord Jesus. ***“You have died to the law through the body of Christ,”*** St. Paul says. When a person is dead, the law no longer has any power over him. You cannot command, or condemn, or punish a person who is dead.

- Lincoln, and all the others whose statues are being threatened and torn down: they are not affected by this in the least!

Even so, if you are in Christ – if you believe He is not only God’s prophet but God’s very Son and your Savior by His death for sin and His resurrection from the dead – then you are no longer under the law... not even God’s Law. It’s power over you has ended.

How? By your faith in Jesus? Is your faith a work that fulfills God’s Law? Is faith your marital promise that joins you to Jesus and His death for your sin? Paul does use marriage, and its being ended by death, as an illustration of how in Christ we are freed from the Law. So, let’s consider this Biblical illustration of our relationship with Jesus.

In marriage the two become one, so that the debts of one spouse become the debts of the other. But, you can’t give your debt to one who doesn’t want to marry you and take on that debt, can you? Your debt to God is His requirement that you obey His law, and also pay for your breaking of that Law. Jesus, the holy and eternal Son of God, is before the Law and the giver of the Law. He did not have that debt. But when He became man and was baptized with all the sinful people who went to John the Baptist, He took upon Himself our debt and pledged His body and life to us all. He fulfilled that pledge when He died on the cross and paid the debt we all owe. He then took you personally to Himself when you were baptized. ***“All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death,”*** says Paul in Rom. 6. ***“We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*** And so, he goes on to write in the next chapter, ***“you have died to the law through the body of Christ.”*** The work done by Jesus in His body was given to you in Baptism.

By it He creates your marriage relationship with Him. Faith is acknowledging this, believing that your baptism into Jesus makes you a new person. You have been raised with Him and are not under the Law. It cannot accuse you and make you guilty, for Jesus bore your sins and the Law's accusation and paid the penalty for you. You are innocent! The Law also cannot rule you or command you, no more than it commanded or ruled Jesus after He rose from the dead. ***"You belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God,"*** Paul says.

This is how it is for us now in Christ. We are new people, risen with Jesus and filled with His Spirit! We are ***"released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit,"*** Paul says. That life is a joyful life of freedom and loving service of others. Ah, but this is not simple and easy, is it? We live in this old, sinful world, and still have our old, sinful flesh. Erecting the Emancipation Statue in 1876 didn't immediately change everything for people who had been slaves. Even so, the message of our emancipation in Jesus doesn't immediately change everything for us. Why not? Why does Jesus not bring peace on earth, but a sword? Why does He who joined Himself to us in our flesh and in your baptism end up dividing people, even family members?

It is because our emancipation is in Him alone. He alone could do it, for He alone is God: the true God who is the giver of the Law, and the true God who alone became flesh and paid our debt to the Law. Jesus wasn't opposed because of His teaching of Law and morality, but because He declared Himself to be the true and only God, and His death and resurrection the only way to life with God for us. This means that all obedience of ours, even the best of our works, is discounted as useless. You must turn away from yourself and all that you are and trust in Jesus alone. This is Christ's message. It is a hard message. It brings division.

But, ***"Whoever receives you receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me,"*** Jesus promises. You who receive this message and believe in Jesus are truly alive! Along with Jesus, you have God the Father, and the Holy Spirit living within you! You live to bear rich fruit for Jesus: the fruit of joyful worship, and the fruit of joyful living.

"I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations," says Ps. 89:1. We do this with our gracious words, and we do this with our gracious lives. Be joyful, people of God! You walk in the light of God's smiling face: exalted in Jesus forever, and exalting others by Him forever! Amen.