He Lives to God

Romans 6:1-11

On our way home from Wisconsin yesterday, we stopped along the highway to get gas and something to eat. The question came up, “Where are we?” Since neither of us had paid attention to the exit we got off at, we did not know. I guess we speculated loud enough that the waitress overheard and laughed as she said, you are at South Haven, Michigan, USA, North America. It was a humorous event for us and broke up the monotony of the trip. Traveling through Michigan is familiar no matter where we go or whether we don’t know exactly where we are. But traveling to a foreign country is a whole different ball game. Customs and scenery are often quite different than that which we are used to. We had an experience in Barcelona that highlighted how things can be different. We had eaten at a sidewalk café just the night before and had decided to eat breakfast at the same café since it was just down from the motel. As we settled for breakfast, the same waiter who had waited on us the night before came over to our table, looking very glum, much different than the funny character he had been the night before. He quietly explained to us that the group sitting at the next table had been at the café just the night before too. Then he said that the husband of one of the women had died suddenly in the middle of the night. The group had been ready to embark on a cruise the next day. They were trying to get some nourishment after a long, tragic night of events. So we went over to the table to offer our condolences and what pastoral support we could. After listening and empathizing for a few minutes, the group began to explain the sequence of events that happened right after the man’s death. They commented on the helpfulness of the Barcelonians during the whole ordeal. The personnel at the motel made all the calls the group needed to cancel the cruise, rearrange the air flight back home, and even arranged to ship the body back to the states. They even called the people who needed to know about the man’s death. The group did not have to do anything. Their comment was that the Barcelonans did everything that the Californians back home would not have even begun to do. They compared the two cultures and believed the differences were significant. We quietly commented that they did not know northern Michiganders, but we were grateful that they had received such help in their time of need.

When we are baptized or when we accept and believe in Jesus, we are in a sense moved from one country to another. In baptism we have died to sin and find ourselves in a place where sin has no hold on us. We walk on resurrection ground. We may keep on sinning, but we know ourselves as forgiven and loved. Our present behavior reflects our present status, i.e. living in the resurrection promises and our future reality. Our actions direct us and reflect our knowledge of a forgiving and loving God. If God is at the heart of who we are, our lives will reflect that, even if somewhat imperfectly. We keep trying to do what is right.

Sin remains powerful and seductive to even the most seasoned Christian. But we as Christians know the promises that have been given in the resurrection story. We are freed from the power and guilt of sin, and we are promised that we will live in Christ eternally. It is true that we will die unless Jesus returns first, but our actions and words stem from our knowledge of those promises.

That means that we might and probably will continue sinning, continue to give in to subtle sins, but our desire is to keep trying to not sin, to live according to God’s will. We do not have to beat ourselves up because we have given in to sin yet again. We simply keep trying to do things better, knowing that the Spirit helps direct us and moves us forward in faith. God accepts that we sin and accepts us as we are, but God does not intend to leave us there. We try not to sin in the same ways, but begin to change and become new people, transformed to live good lives. It takes time to get rid of old, powerful behaviors that may not be in keeping with what we know God wants, but we have help doing so.

Some of the most powerful sins we commit are those things that hurt ourselves and others. We find it easy to hate those who behave contrary to how we want them to behave. Perhaps they say untrue things about us, or they always seem to have to be “better” than us, or they cut in front of us in a line at the store, or cut us off in traffic, or they persistently harass us about some of our behavior or lack of behavior, they irritate us to no end, etc.

When I was younger I worked with an acquaintance I dreaded to encounter each day. She talked incessantly about herself, and failed to do her share of the workload. My resentment of her continued to grow as time went on. I began to work out ways to actively avoid her. I felt guilty about my own behavior, but seemed to have no will power to change. About the same time, I was reestablishing the faith I had abandoned years prior. I was reading the Bible again, praying more frequently and attending church again. Still, I demonstrated intolerance toward my irritating acquaintance. I knew it was wrong to hate her so much that I avoided her. But still I could not change my attitude toward her. Guilt plagued me. I felt worse about the situation as time went on. So I began to pray about the situation, but nothing seemed to change in my attitude and irritation toward her. But I kept praying. Then one day, I had a chance encounter with her and before I realized it the words, “How have you been?” flew out of my mouth. Unable to pull them back in, I simply stood there waiting for her response. And of course, she began to talk about herself. Well I had asked her about herself. But what I noticed was that I was actually listening to what she was saying. I didn’t seem to want to run away, but patiently heard her out. It was the beginning of noticing the already changed behavior on my part. I began to stop the avoiding behavior and eventually got a sense of why the woman was the way she was. At first I began to tolerate her better, but as time went on I began to understand her better. My guilt was eliminated, my attitude toward her changed. I don’t know if she actually changed but I did. I felt more in keeping with what God wanted me to be and do with this woman.

When we live in resurrection territory, we do change. Our own behaviors toward others begin to change as we become more Christ-like. But it means taking our faith seriously, studying what Jesus did and said and trying to live by his example. Over time it gets easier living in the new resurrection territory. Even if we have lived by our faith for a long time, there are always new things to learn about the ways we live life. That’s why those little devotionals we read are important. They show us possibilities of who we can become. That’s why reading and praying are important. It gives the Spirit opportunity to continue transforming us into people of God following in Jesus’ footsteps. Spiritual discipline helps us know how to live to God better. That’s why coming together in the community of faith is important, we remind each other and give example for each other what it means to live a Christian life. That’s why it is important to share our faith stories, so we can find inspiration and see how God is working in others so we can recognize better how God is working within each of us.

Some sins may still have a hold on us. But God doesn’t want it to be so. God will continue to move us toward eliminating those sins that we can’t seem to break. God will continue to strength our resolve and give us the courage to say no to those harmful, sinful habits we hang on to. Our hatreds can be broken, our addictions can be broken, our harmful behaviors toward others can be broken. And we will continue to learn to live to God, this magnificent, amazing, enormous God of ours, who knows everything about us, who continues to transform us, who desires more than anything to be so much a part of our lives that he gave his most precious Son to show us the way, to die for us in suffering, who carried the weight of our guilt and sin upon himself, who cleared the way for us to be true children of God. It’s about learning to live in a different culture, the culture of God.