

VAPC - July 12/20

THE GREATEST 'THEREFORE'

Isaiah 55: 9-13; Romans 8: 1-11

I have good news for you. Really, really good news. It's not about me, its not about VAPC, its not about COVID-19, its about our faith, and it comes not from me, but from the Apostle Paul. I mean this sincerely. It is great good news! And here it is:

“There is **therefore** now no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus.
For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ
has set you free from the law of sin and death.”

That is how the majestic eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans begins. The death sentence hanging over all humanity has been removed for those whom are in Christ Jesus.

This is a sudden reversal of death's judgement, annouced in open court for all to hear. The gavel has come down and found us guilty, thus giving God his due. There is no loophole, no higher court to which one might appeal; the verdict is final. The law is God's terrible and inescapable judgement of the death sentence.

No one believes this, of course. When people receive the death sentence, they are forced by instinct to to seek a gracious God apart from the law. Then Paul brings the new word that ends this old life: in Chapter 3 he writes, “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...through faith in Jesus Christ, for whose sake God raises the dead to new life and declares, “There is now **therefore** no death sentence.” That's some **therefore**, isn't it - nearly unbelievable. It is amazing grace.

I'll come back to this, But I want to move briefly to our reading from Isaiah 55. Any clear vision of the future starts with hope. Pentecost is a story about hope. Now some six weeks after Pentecost, to think and imagine new possibilities beyond our present circumstances remains a challenge, given the complexities of life today. Hope must be more than a mountaintop experience with the Spirit. It must be grounded in the concrete realities of both heaven and earth.

This passage in Isaiah reflects an understanding of hope inspired by moments of transcendence in the context of the everyday struggles of human existence.

Chapter 55 begins with a gracious invitation:

“Ho, all who are thirsty,
Come for water,
Even if you have no money;
Come, buy food and eat:
Buy food without money,
Wine and milk without cost.”

Our reading at verse 9 begins with the Lord’s claim that “my ways are higher than your ways.” This not a put-down to humans, but a challenge to look up. Hope **not** rooted in the concrete realities of the moment often leads to even deeper despair. However, the invitation in this text bases hope on a theological reality that is grounded in creation itself.

Although Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” Isaiah sees the evidence of God’s faithfulness in the rhythmic nature of creation. Though the Lord’s ways and thoughts are higher than the earth, things high will come down, just as rain and snow come down to nourish the earth back to health.

I am often struck by stories of faith when visiting folk, particularly when visiting bereaved people remembering their loved one who passed. I came across a story of such an occasion from another minister that was particularly apt in light of Isaiah’s perspective. He writes of a get-to-know-you meeting with a new congregant: “When I had lunch with the chief of heart failure and transplantation at a local major medical center, we dove conversationally into the meat of the matter. He shared his conviction that there is more than just a natural rhythm built into life, more than just karma, more than “what goes round comes round.” Through years of life-and-death situations, he affirmed the good and redemptive purpose at work in life, even in the loss of life.

Quickly switching metaphors, he used a sports analogy from the baseball diamond to share another way of looking at this point of view with the indisputable statement that “God bats last.” The good doctor had just emerged from a session with a family who had lost a loved one but who were nonetheless grateful for the caring and attentiveness provided by all the hospital staff.

For this doctor, it was clear that the loved one had lived a good life, had “fought the good fight,” and had been given the willingness during his wait for a transplant to return to the One who made him. This is great comfort to a family. The

physician observed that life does not return empty to those left in loss, but becomes deeper and richer through the prism of memory blessed with mercy."

So let us return to Paul's "great therefore." "There is therefore now no death sentence." All stand condemned before God, but to whom belongs this gospel? Paul says it is "for those who are *in Christ Jesus*. Who is in Christ and how did they get that way? Likewise, who remains "in the *flesh*?", and what does it mean to be in the Spirit? All of this in verse 9. What does it all mean? Well, that's a tough question.

The answer is perhaps found in the tiniest phrase: *en Christo*, "in Christ." To be "in Christ" is categorically different from not to be "in Christ," It is not simply a difference of degree, but a genuine difference of kind.

To be "in Christ" is to be a part of something far larger than oneself. It is to encounter a power astronomically greater than the sum of all the willpower you have ever mustered, added to all the physical power you have ever exerted, added to all the clout you have ever had. Add all those up, and it is infinitesimal, compared to the power of God in Christ. There is a severe power shortage on our side.

It is not that we are powerless, for surely we have the power to hurt others and ourselves, as well as to help others and ourselves. It is just that our power is so bound by our capacities, so limited by our perspectives, so tied to our locale. This may be what Paul means by the phrase "in the flesh."

To be "in Christ" is to be swept up by the power of the Spirit and to be free from what has bound us, limited us, tied us. To be "in Christ" is not the result of something we do; it is something God does for us, Paul does not exhort us to get our act together and get "in Christ." instead, he announces, better, he boldly proclaims: "but you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." This proclamation **is** the gospel, **is** the good news!

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..." it is difficult to believe this good news, but it is not impossible to believe it. To believe it is to reorient one's life toward a power greater than oneself. Even more, it is to have one's life oriented by a power greater than any power we know in this world. Perhaps the greatest power we know in this world is the power of death, which ultimately conquers all of us and everyone we know. That power does not simply attend the moment of our dying; it is a power that creeps into our lives, our communities, and our bodies long before the moment we breath our last.

However, even this power is not enough when compared to the power of "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead." There is an end to the old creation

and the beginning of a new in Christ: "for the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death."

This is not a new metaphysical law; it is the Hebrew way of putting something to an end by applying the verb against the verb. Death is put to death. Law is "lawed" against, and this is the true work of the Holy Spirit.

The letter of the law killed - it ended in a death sentence. The Spirit is life. The law showed itself to be sick on account of the flesh. Righteousness was always impossible for law; indeed, the law was never meant to make anyone righteous. Instead, God sent his own son - incarnate - who took the death sentence of sin in his flesh and pronounced the death sentence upon **it**. Not law, but Christ. We all stood under the death sentence, and then Christ stepped in with a new declaration.

Death does not bind him any longer. The goal of flesh is law that seeks to be righteous in one's own self, but ends in death. The Spirit's goal is to bring Christ to us while we are as yet ungodly.

So the dramatic conclusion of this incredible good news: "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you," and I'm not making this up, it's verse 11. This is not merely mystical union or some form of instrumental ecclesiology; it is death to the old sinner and a new creation by the Creator Spirit, who places Christ's death sentence upon our death sentence, in order to create anew - *ex nihilo* - out of nothing.

A postscript. "There is **therefore** now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Can you feel the freedom in this magnificent saying? This freedom is nearly unbelievable, but not completely unbelievable. It is the freedom given to us to go beyond our limitations.

It is the freedom of being part of God's movement with the world that transcends our locale and our lifetime. By the tiny phrase "in Christ," Paul has said we are not constrained by our limitations, shortcomings, failings; we are not even condemned by our cruelties, hurtful ways, hateful actions. Instead, we are free. Free at last!

Free to be! *Free!*

Amen.