

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
June 30, AD 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Living Life

Do you know what this stained glass window means? It's a scallop shell with three drops of water dripping from it. Do you know what it means? No, our church does not have an endorsement deal with Red Lobster to advertise seafood in our sanctuary. The shell symbolizes baptism. In the ancient days of the Christian Church, people were often baptized by having the water poured over their heads. In the Mediterranean Sea area, where Christianity got its start, scallop shells were used to pour the baptismal water. Ever since then, a scallop shell with water dripping from it has symbolized baptism.

Oh, and why three drops? Think of what is said when someone is baptized: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The three drops of water remind us of our God, who is three-in-one. Really it is none other than the Triune God who is at work through water and word in baptism.

Last week we began a series of sermons based on the apostle Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. The theme for this series is "Our Life in Christ." Last week's section from Romans chapter five laid the foundation. Do you remember? We heard about real life—life with God. This is life that means something, no matter what. This is life that will last. This is life with never-ending significance. We heard God tell us two fundamental things about this life. (I didn't tell you that there was going to be a quiz, did I?) God says that such real life with him is impossible to get from any human source. When the first human being, Adam, sinned against God, he lost life for all human beings. Ever since Adam, human beings have been unable to get back the life with God that Adam lost. That's the first thing God told us. Pretty depressing.

But then there was another truth God told us about getting life. And this one was not depressing at all. In fact, this truth has been given the name "gospel," which means "good news"—*the* good news. God told us that real life with him, which we can never hope to get from ourselves or any other human source—that real life with him is ours! Why? Because he gave it to us! Free of charge, purely because he loved us. He gave it to us by means of Jesus Christ. Jesus earned life with God by living a life without sin. Jesus suffered death in our place—death in the deepest sense. Jesus rose from the dead, back to life. The sin that killed us? Gone. Jesus took it away. The death that haunted us? Defeated when Jesus rose from the dead. The life we lacked? Ours as a free gift from God.

This week, Paul talks about living this life that he has given to us. He tells us about living life, first of all, as people who are dead to sin, and second as people who are alive to God. Now, I should warn you, if you are looking for specific practical tips about living your life—about what to do in certain situations that you face at work or in your family or in your school—well, I can't speak to you each individually this morning. But I can tell you what God says here, and it's something that is eminently practical for every single Christian person ever, and that includes you, wherever you are in life. This message from God about living life is practical, and it has something to do with this stained glass window and with the water depicted on it.

Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul, from Romans chapter six:

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² *By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?* ³ *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* ⁴ *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

⁵ *If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.* ⁶ *For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—* ⁷ *because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.*

⁸ *Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.* ⁹ *For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.* ¹⁰ *The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.* ¹¹ *In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

As people who are dead to sin

This section begins with a question that seems utterly logical. Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? Think about it: Paul has just been writing about how God freely pardons people and forgives their sin. Well, if God forgives sins, then why not sin all the time? Why not sin if God will forgive those sins anyway? Why not help God get his money's worth?

Paul answers, "Because that's not who we are." We're not that kind of people. Not that we're some special kind of people, because we are a certain nationality or because we belong to a certain church group. What I mean is this: we are people that God has done something to. We are people that God has acted on in love.

We are people for whom Jesus came to this earth. We are people for whom Jesus lived a perfect life—the life that we failed to live. We are people for whom Jesus died, suffering all our punishment and shame in our place. We are people whom God then reached out and forgave and adopted as his own.

We are people who are not the same anymore. Not since our baptism.

This old self, the "old me", the sinful person who came into this world—this old self died when I was baptized. At that time, God took all the condemnation I deserved—hell itself—and he buried it. God said, "Jesus died for you. He paid for your sins. All this guiltiness that you have in my sight, I'm putting it all into a grave and burying it. It's gone. And the power your old self has over you, to lead you into sin all the time, to be a bad influence on you—I'm killing that and burying it, too."

God killed our old, damned sinful life. He gave us a new one in exchange. Now he wants us to live the life we've been given. Listen again: Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Now that God has buried our sin with Christ, we don't have to live a life that bounces from one sin to another. Let me illustrate. This sounds crass, but I'll say it anyway. If you died tonight, would your boss make you come into work tomorrow? (Some people are nodding!) Seriously, if you die, your obligations to your boss are over. Same thing with school—dying will get you out of going to school. Now there are mix-ups with paperwork, etc. that we hear about, when someone gets a tax bill even though they've died, situations like that. But in all normal circumstances, death frees us from obligations.

That, Paul says, is what has happened to us and sin. Do we have to sin? Do we have to listen each time that old sinful person in us tells us to go against God, to hurt him, to hurt other people? No! We're dead to sin! We don't have to listen to it anymore. We're not obligated to do what our sinful nature tells us to do.

God killed our sinful nature when he baptized us. We died to sin that day. Sure, our sinful nature comes back each day, like a zombie in "Night of the Living Dead." What do we do then? We kill it! We put to death all over again our evil deeds and desires.

That's why Christians regularly confess their sins. What we're doing when we confess our sins is standing up this old sinful self that lurks within us so that God can cut him down. We get our old sinful self out in the open, and God hacks him down and puts him in the grave. How? By forgiving our sins.

How should we live our lives? God says, "As people who are dead to sin." We don't say, "Since God will forgive me, I'll sin a lot!" No. We don't say that because God has killed our old self. To the baptized, the blood of Christ is not just a "get out of jail free" card. The blood of Christ is our release from sin and all the death that sin brings with it.

As people who are alive to God

When we were baptized, God connected us to Jesus. Remember what happened to Jesus? He died. That's what we just talked about. The power of sin lies dead and buried for us. But remember also what happened to Jesus after he died. He came back to life. He came out of his grave, alive and transformed.

Now that Jesus has risen, he will never die again. He dealt with sin once and for all. Now he lives. Remember, when we were baptized, God connected us to Jesus. Our sins he killed. And just like Jesus, he raised us up to new life. Listen again to how Paul phrases it: Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

We are people who live for God. When God speaks through his Bible, through his sacraments, we listen. His message of grace and forgiveness means the world to us. And when he guides us, telling us what he wants us to do as we live this new life for him, we listen. We find ourselves caring not just about ourselves and what we want but about God and what he wants. Why do we care? Because we are alive to God.

Of course, much of the time we don't feel alive to God. We don't feel ecstatic, as if we had been caught up to heaven. We feel tired. We feel frustrated. We feel burned-out. Or we don't feel much at all.

But you know what? Even when we don't feel alive to God, we still are.

Think of it this way. We're American citizens, right? Let me ask you this: Do you always feel like an American? This Thursday I'm sure a lot of us will. We'll pay attention (maybe more than we did last year) when we hear the national anthem. We'll put our hands over our hearts as the flag marches by in the parade. We'll feel like Americans.

But do we always feel like Americans? Sometimes—maybe most of the time—we don't consciously think about it. When you were asleep last night, did you feel like an American? Probably not. But were you still an American? Of course!

My point is this: even when we don't feel alive to God, we still are. We are because while we were dead in our sins, God made us alive. God washed our sins away in Holy Baptism. And

through this special bath he killed and buried our sin while giving us a brand new life in exchange.

Martin Luther, when he was feeling troubled, used to say, “I am baptized!” “I am baptized.” Notice the tense? Not just “I *was* baptized.” Not just, “Yeah, a long time ago—I don’t even remember it—I got some water dumped on me and some words said over me and the sign of the cross made on me. A cute ceremony, but pretty much worthless now. Not really much good anymore.” Baloney. “I *am* baptized.” I am a person whom God loves. I am a person whom Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, has shed his blood for. I am a person to whom God has reached out. I am a person whom God has embraced and adopted. I am, by the grace of God, *alive*.”

What God could have done was this. He could have said, “You want to have life with me? Then act like it! Do what I tell you to do, and if you do well enough, you’ll get life!” But he didn’t. Instead, God said, “Here! I am making you alive! Life, peace with me, assurance that you are loved, heaven itself—all these things are yours. You are alive to me. Now go and live as one who is alive.”

Baptism has been called a Christian’s “tomb and womb.” Get it?

When God baptized us in water, he took our sins, along with their power over us and the hell they earned us, and he killed them, burying them in the tomb with Jesus. At the same time, God took the perfection of Jesus, who rose from the dead to live forever, and he gave it to us. He gave us new life in that water. He killed us and made us alive. Baptism is both tomb and womb.

You are a person who is dead to sin. You are a person who is alive to God. These are facts. As certainly as you have been washed by water and the word, this is who you are.

So what do we have to say about living life? Live as a person who is dead to sin. Live as a person who is alive to God.

Toward sin, be a corpse. To God, look alive! Because you are alive, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.