



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

A Whole New World

by Rev. John Strommen on Romans 6:1-14

Sunday, June 2, 2019

When our boys were young we decided to venture into having pets, so we bought two hamsters, Snowflake and Oreo. Unfortunately, Oreo was able to escape on several occasions. What's interesting is how we were able to entice Oreo back. We had a twofold strategy: Leave her cage open in case she just wanted to come back and hop on her little exercise wheel. Might that entice her to return?

The other enticement was food: carrot bits in a trail leading to makeshift stairs and into a bucket, which had more food, and no exits. Which option do you think enticed her back into captivity? A few nights after she had escaped, we were wondering whether she would ever come back and suddenly we heard the wheel cranking away downstairs. Oreo had returned to her open cage and was in a full sprint on her wheel. Why had she returned to her cage? Obviously, on her travels she had eaten exotic foods and now needed a workout!

Go figure! Who would have thought that's how you catch a hamster? I know some of you are saying, "well, if you had put carrot *cake* in there instead of just carrots, the result would have been different." That would work for me, yes.

Unfortunately, Oreo escaped again a few days later. And again, we set up the same two options. And it worked. Except this time, I found Oreo in the bucket, plump and chuck full of carrots. "So, Oreo, the old training wheel option didn't look so good this time, huh?" And yes, Oreo escaped several more times, but it was the food bucket that brought her back each time.

Oreo is a lot like you and me, folks. We have good intentions for our various self-improvement plans, but then soon we're back to the path of least resistance. Why work out when you can go to happy hour for buffalo wings and a craft beer or two? Why spend time in prayer when there are so many apps left on your phone that you haven't checked

yet today (OK, that's me). Why volunteer at a soup kitchen when you can avoid the underprivileged altogether?

Many of us view faith and religion this way. It's something we *should* do better at, but, as much as we try, our self-improvement plans to be a better Christian often fall short. They fall short because we are inevitably bound to our own sin and brokenness. So, the power of positive thinking just won't get us very far, even when we're trying to do it for God. Either we're just too tired or our various appetites or crutches carry us in a different direction.

But sometimes religion – and life - is an achievement for us that can generate great resolve, just like Oreo the first time he escaped. So, we try very hard to be productive and accomplish things, and we muster considerable discipline and head for the training wheel, thinking we can justify our lives and make a name for ourselves. And this is the most malignant form of rebellion against God: the person who doesn't really need God and embarks on a Tower of Babel-like project in an attempt to reach God on his/her own terms. This, of course, is the opposite of faith. Literally, life is a treadmill and not in a good way.

Our lesson today from Romans reminds us that spiritual transformation comes not through self-help programs, ambitious striving or having all of your desires satiated. It comes from dying and rising through baptism so that we might live a free life and a new life. As Paul wrote in Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

In Christian baptism, we've left one world *behind*. We have *died* to that world - the world of sin and death – and been *freed* from that world. And, in that same baptism, we have been relocated in a new one: the world promised to us by God based on grace and love, where life can flourish. It is nothing less than the world created by the resurrection of Jesus. As Paul tells it in Romans, the liberation of baptism is very akin to

the Exodus for the Jews who were delivered by God from slavery, crossed the Red Sea and eventually entered the promised land.

Like the Exodus, baptism is all about a pathway created by God to another world, a world where life is nurtured, not crushed.

The book and movie “Prince of Tides” is, in part, a story about children growing up in a dysfunctional family who yearn to break free from the prison that is their childhood world. In the opening monologue, narrated by one of the adult children, we find out that these children located another world where they were free – a world that is rich with baptismal imagery.

(The Prince of Tides scene is children running from their house onto a dock and running off the dock, fully clothed into the water. They then form a circle under water and hold hands for as long as they can hold their breath. Here is the narration that accompanies these images):

I don't know when my parents began their war against each other, but I do know the only prisoners they took were their children. When my brother, sister and I needed to escape we developed a ritual. We found a silent, soothing world, where there was no pain, a world without mothers or fathers. We would make a circle bound by flesh and blood and water. And only when we felt our lungs betray us, would we rise toward the light, and the fear of what lay in wait for us above the surface. All this was a long time ago, before I chose not to have a memory.

Another world. One that was different than the one they were used to. A silent, soothing world bound by flesh and blood and water.

As people who believe in Jesus, we too, have been given the freedom of another world - one bound by flesh, blood and water. The water is our baptism and the flesh and blood are the body of Christ of which we are a part. It is this flesh, blood and water that saves us from a broken world of growing and multiplying burdens and gives us the possibility for meaningful change in our lives. And this is pure gift!

None of this is to suggest that *sin* has died. It still lives on in this world and still knocks us around, disfigures us, calls to us. Obviously, we still sin! Baptism does not mean that sin has died, but that *we have died to sin*. Through our union with Christ Jesus, we have died at the hands of sin and risen again with Christ, so that in Christ, sin cannot

destroy us for it no longer reigns over us. We live in a different world now— one of grace and love, so rejoice and act like it! Yes, get to work!

Another way of putting it is that we've been freed from the power of sin and have joined the resistance. We're on a new team now, but need to constantly remember who we are, because if we want, we can let sin rule us again and give it all up. While the gift of grace and rebirth has been given to us, the *fullness* of God's reign has not yet been established. Enslavement, then, remains a possibility because we are not completely free of sin. This makes you free to be a part of the resistance movement. If you're completely bound, you're not free to resist. If you're already in paradise, there is no struggle. We're in between.

Yesterday we had some roofers over to do work on our house. I went out to see how they were doing and discovered that one of them was a member of my former church and is now a member of Recovery Church in St Paul, a church comprised of folks who are in recovery from chemical dependency. He went on to say how "real" everyone is at this church. I asked him what he meant by that. He said, "They all know why they're there; that they've been saved from their own self-destruction and are now totally dependent on God." In a word, they are free from prison, "recovering" and living a new life in a whole new world.

A Christian church is no different. We are all recovering. We've been rescued from a sickness unto death, as Jean Paul Sartre called it. We call it sin, and it is both perpetuated by us and done to us. And now we are free to live in a new world where God's son, Jesus, has shaped its contours. It is a world based on wholeness, not brokenness. It is a world based on love and forgiveness, where life thrives as it was intended to.

As members of the Recovery Church know all too well, *staying in the new world* of sobriety gifted to them by Christ is critical. They can go back to their old world if they wish, but why would you go back to slavery when you were made free?

This is why Martin Luther wrote that as baptized children of God, we are daily called to die to sin and rise to newness of life by the power of the Holy Spirit! That's why we re-affirm and remember our baptisms once a month in worship. To remember who we are and what world we live in. May all who are here today daily die and rise in Christ! Amen.