

Title: Grace Changes Everything
6/21 Sermon – Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time
Rev. Lindsey Odom
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17
Reading from the New Testament: Romans 6:1-11

How many of you remember those growth charts that get hung, maybe on a doorway of your home, or penciled onto the frame of a hallway, where year after year, someone marks your height. Your height gets marked with a line, a date, and your name written just beside it. You stand as tall as you can, back straight, heels flat, hoping maybe this is the year you have grown just a little bit more. And if you are anything like me, growing up as a fraternal twin, it became a little bit competitive. I can still remember trying to stand just a little taller than my twin, adjusting my posture, and maybe even trying to sneak up on my toes just enough to win that moment. Because somehow, being just a little bit taller than my twin felt like a major success that came with bragging rights, and felt like it meant something significant. It is almost as if those marks on the growth chart said something about who you were. And over time, those marks begin to tell a story. You can look back and see where you once were and how much you've grown. But here's the truth: you were never meant to stay at any one of those marks. That line on the growth chart was never your final identity; rather, it was just a moment in your story that continues to unfold. You were always meant to grow beyond it. Today is also Father's Day, and for many of us, those kinds of memories of measuring ourselves on a growth chart are tied to the people who stood in those doorways with us such as dads, grandfathers, and other fatherly figures who helped mark those moments and shape who we are. We give thanks for the ways they have loved, guided, and nurtured us. And at the same time, we also recognize that this day can carry a different weight for others, like grief, absence, complicated relationships, or wounds

that are still tender. Wherever this day finds you, the good news of the gospel is that we are not defined by what has been, but held in what God is still doing in us and through us.

And yet, in ways much deeper than childhood growth charts, we carry marks in our lives that we do treat as permanent, such as marks of who we were, marks of mistakes we've made, marks of words, actions, or past conversations we wish we could take back, marks of patterns we've inherited, marks from wounds we carry, and marks of sins we cannot seem to shake. Trust me, even I carry these kinds of marks. We all do, and over time, we begin to believe those marks define us, that this is just who I am and that there is no fixing it or changing these marks.

And it is precisely this kind of thinking that the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 6. After saying something almost shocking in verse 1 that where sin increases, grace increases even more, Paul asks the question he knows everyone is already thinking: "well then, should we just keep sinning so that grace can keep growing?" Paul is essentially saying "if the increase of sin leads only to more and more grace, then shouldn't an individual give sin free rein?" Paul's answer is sharp and immediate. His answer is "by no means!" But what's striking is how he answers. He doesn't say, "because it's wrong," or "because you should try harder." Instead, he says, something to the effect of: "because that's not who you are anymore." Paul shifts the entire conversation from behavior to identity. He says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" In other words, something fundamental has changed because of our baptisms, which confirms that we are beloved children of God and belong to Christ. Our lives are no longer defined by those old marks. In Christ, we have died to the old reality of sin, and we have been raised into something new, a new life in Christ.

As John Calvin writes, "We are engrafted into the body of Christ... that we may be partakers of his life." That means your identity is no longer something you achieve; rather, it is

something you receive from rooting your life in and through Christ. It is a true gift. Baptism, in our Reformed understanding, is a sign and seal of God's gracious action and our grateful response. Baptism is the sign that we belong to God, and it is the seal that we are heirs to the covenant of grace and members of God's family. Our old marks of sin do not get the final word as baptism includes affirmation that we are a beloved child of God, the washing away of our sins or past mistakes, and the gift of new life in and through Christ.

But Paul is also honest about something we all know, which is that sin is not something we can overcome on our own. It is what God does in and through Jesus Christ that breaks the power of sin. In Christ's death, sin's hold on us is shattered because of his sacrifice on the cross for each of us. Because of Christ's resurrection, new life emerges. And Paul says this is not just Christ's story; it is yours. In verse 4 of our scripture passage, Paul says "we have been buried with him so that just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might walk in the newness of life." Notice the direction of Paul's preaching in this passage. It is not "do more so that you can receive grace and become new," but rather, it is "you have been made new by God's grace in Christ, now go and live like it." Or as Dallas Willard puts it, "Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning." In other words, grace does not mean we stop trying. Rather, it means we stop trying to prove ourselves to God, and instead begin living out the new life God has already given us through the gift of God's grace. The life of faith is not about striving to become someone different; rather, it is about living into who we already are in Christ. And yet, if we are honest, that's exactly where confusion can creep in because grace can start to sound like a free pass if we are not careful.

I remember one time my little sister Gracie and I were in the car with my mom after church. Gracie had been acting out, which, to be fair, was not exactly a rare occurrence in our

house, and she was on the verge of getting in trouble. On the way home, we started talking about what we had learned in Sunday school, and my mom made a comment like, “You’re on thin ice.” And without missing a beat, Gracie said, “Well, I might be in trouble with you, but we can’t get in trouble with God because God gives us grace and we’re forgiven.” Reflecting back on her comment, that is actually a pretty profound theological claim for an 8 year old child to make, and honestly, not a bad summary of the gospel. But if we are not careful, that’s exactly the misunderstanding Paul is addressing here. Grace can start to sound like a free pass, as if nothing needs to change. It becomes something we receive from God without allowing it to reshape how we live, and that is NOT what Paul is describing. Grace does not excuse sin; rather, it frees us from it. It does not leave us where we are; rather, it changes who we are. It transforms us from the inside out. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns, grace is not “cheap grace.” It is costly grace, costly because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, and costly because it actually transforms us. It joins us to Christ in his death and raises us into new life. Through God’s grace, we have been given a new identity and now, we are being expected to live it out.

So, when Paul says, ‘consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God... and do not let sin reign,’ he is not asking us to pretend something is true that is not yet true. He is calling us to live according to what God has already done and made true in Jesus Christ. In other words, because of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for each one of us, we have a new identity given to us by God, and now we are called to live it out. We are no longer enslaved to sin, no longer ultimately defined by our failures, our shame, or our past. Instead, through Christ’s death and resurrection, we have been claimed by grace, made alive to God, and welcomed into new life. The call of discipleship, then, is not about trying to earn a new identity, but about learning to live faithfully into the identity we have already received because of Christ.

While God's grace frees us from sin, most of us are still learning how to live in that freedom. We are no longer defined by sin, and yet sin still tries to define us. And maybe that's where we come back one more time to the growth charts. Because faith is not about pretending the old marks are not there. Rather, it is about refusing to believe your old marks of sin are the end of your story, and trusting that in Christ, there is more to come. Our past failures, mistakes, and sins may still try to speak into our lives, but they no longer have the power to name who we are; rather, Christ does. Through his death and resurrection, we have already been made alive to God in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to live as people who belong not to sin, but to grace. And that changes how we live. Because if we have died with Christ and been raised with Christ, then we are called to live like resurrection people. This means we begin to forgive more because we have already been forgiven. We love more abundantly because we were first loved by Christ. We pursue faithfulness, justice, and peace, not because we are trying to earn grace or good standing, but because we are God's people, and it is what we are called to do.

And that identity of knowing we belong to God in and through Christ and that nothing can ever change that, begins to shape even the ordinary and simple ways we move through the world each day. It means we feed the hungry because grace has taught us that every person bears the image of God. We stand beside those who are hurting, marginalized, or forgotten because Christ first loved us and stands beside us in our brokenness. We seek reconciliation instead of division. We speak the truth when it is costly. We serve our neighbors not for recognition or praise, but because resurrection life always moves us outward in love.

In our world shaped so often by selfishness, fear, and indifference, the church is called to embody something radically different, which is the living witness of Christ's grace at work in

our lives, our communities, and our world. Think for a moment about what that looks like. Resurrection is not simply about life after death, but about God's new creation breaking into the present. That is exactly what Paul is describing here. Through Christ, God has already begun a new creation in us. The old powers of sin and death do not own us anymore. They do not define us anymore. Grace declares that our truest identity is found in Christ alone.

So yes, we are still growing. We are still learning what it means to live as people who belong to Christ. But we do not grow in order to become loved by God. We grow because we already are loved unconditionally by God. We do not strive toward a new identity; rather, we live out the identity grace has already given us, remembering that all of us are beloved children of God. Because of God's grace, we are alive to God and free to live in a way that glorifies God.

Because of God's grace, sin is no longer dictating our lives. Because of God's grace, our story is no longer ruled by failure or shame, but by the resurrection life of Jesus Christ that frees us to live differently, to love more deeply, to forgive more freely, to serve more boldly, and to move through this world as people shaped not by sin or fear, but by the hope and promise of new life. And that means that in Christ, we are not stuck. The old lines no longer define us because Grace has already spoken a deeper truth over our lives, which is that we belong to Christ, and nothing, not even sin or death, can separate us from the life God has already given us in and through Christ. We are no longer defined by what once held us captive. We belong to Christ. We are alive in Christ. And when we begin to trust what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ, we begin to see the truth Paul is proclaiming: grace changes everything. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Benediction:

Go now in the confidence that you belong to Christ.
Do not live as people defined by sin or fear,
but as those made alive by the grace of God.
And as you go, remember this truth:
grace changes everything.
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Go now in the confidence that you belong to Christ.
Do not live as people shaped by sin or fear,
but as those made alive and freed by the grace of God.
Remembering that
grace changes everything.
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

OR

Go now remembering who you are:
You belong to Christ.
You are no longer defined by what once held you captive.
Live as resurrection people,
trusting always that **grace changes everything**.
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.