

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 7 -- Year A
June 24-25, 2023
Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:1b-11
St. Matthew 10:24-39

This is not rare, but virtually unique: the opportunity for a Christian congregation to be the very first to hear read publicly a newly-discovered portion of Scripture. This heretofore-unknown fragment of papyrus appears to be additional verses for the 15th Chapter of Luke's Gospel, that great chapter with its three parables of "lostness:" the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, perhaps better known as "the prodigal son." And, it is to that parable that these newly-discovered verses seemingly apply. This, then, would be verse 33 and following of Luke, Chapter 15:

"And, it came to pass after three years, that the younger son said to himself, 'Behold, my father is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.' Again, therefore, he obtained his inheritance, a third of all that his father possessed and gathered his belongings, his robe, his ring, and his sandals, intending to make his way back to that far country, remembering his days of riotous living. And, lo, as he made his way, he fell among thieves, who stripped him of his robe, his ring, and his sandals, beat him, and left him half-dead. But, a certain Samaritan happened upon him, poured oil upon his wounds, set him on his own beast, and prepared to take him to an inn. But, the younger son said to the Samaritan, 'My father is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. I pray thee, take me to the house of my father.' But, as they were a great way off, his father saw him, and saw that it was the son who had again claimed his inheritance. And, as the father met them on the road, the son said, 'Father, I know that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Welcome me again as you did before.' And, the father said unto him,...."

Unfortunately, it's at this very point that the manuscript becomes utterly unintelligible, leaving us to determine: What did the father say?...Did the father summon the servants to prepare another party?...or, Did the father utter the Aramaic equivalent of "enough is enough"? Which do you think it is? (Don't y'all look at me. You be the Bible scholar! You be the theologian here!)

Today's Second Lesson begins a three-chapter-long section of Paul's Letter to the Romans, a section in which Paul attempts to deal with a question he may have heard more than once: "Should we continue in sin so that God's grace may all-the-more abound?" Before we think that that question is too silly to take seriously, we remember that the great 19th Century German poet and philosopher Heinrich Heine said on his deathbed: "God has to forgive me; that's his job." Linda Eder in our Thursday morning Bible class once mentioned a college acquaintance who spent her weekends in riotous living, and then would go to Confession during the week as a license to go out and do it all over again.

"Should we continue in sin," Paul asks, "so that grace may all-the-more abound"? To answer that question, Paul doesn't delve in ethics or philosophy. Instead, over the course of the chapters, by suggestion and by allusion, Paul draws his readers back into a story they all know -- for it is the formative story of the creation of God's people, the children of Israel. It's the story of the Exodus. (And, I trust you will hear echoes of that story in our Second Lessons over the next few weeks.) I'm confident you too know that story. It's the story of how YHWH, Israel's God, the Lord God creator of heaven and earth, rescued His beloved people from the slavery and death of Egypt, even as He promised them a new and abundant life in a new and abundant land,...of how YHWH led these beloved people safely through the waters of the sea, even as those same waters overwhelmed the

Pharaoh's pursuing minions of death, ...of how YHWH planted His people securely on the other side of the water, ...of how at Sinai YHWH established a covenant with His people so that they could live as a people of life and hope and promise, ...and, yet, of how this people repeatedly yearned to return to the "fleshpots" of Egypt, where they would again have become slaves, as much of their appetites as of the Egyptians, ...and, finally, of how YHWH their God kept calling them back to His Word of promise. For, ultimately, this becomes the formative story, for YHWH their God kept his promise of life and abundance, and brought His people to the land He had promised.

By virtue of your Baptism, Paul now declares, this story has become your story. You too have been rescued from slavery and from the power of death. You too have been brought safely through the waters. You too have had your feet planted securely on the other side. You too have been given a covenant by God, a covenant of life and hope and promise. For, by virtue of your Baptism, you too have passed with Jesus, God's Messiah, through the Baptism of His death, safely to the other side. Why would you want to go back? Why would you return to slavery? Why would you surrender the promise of life, of new life, of abundant life, and to go back to where death reigns? Why would you turn your back on the God who claimed, who rescued you, and who brought you through death to Resurrection life?

But, if by virtue of your Baptism the Exodus story of rescue and promise is your story, so too by virtue of your Baptism is one more story, the story of what God accomplished for His beloved people at Calvary, the story of how Jesus passed through death and out the other side. Paul insists that what was true for God's Messiah is also true now for God's people. Hence, Paul said that we have been "Baptized into Messiah Jesus." Just as the Messiah has passed through death and out the other side to the new life of the Resurrection, so too have all the

Baptized. Indeed, Paul's principal understanding of Baptism has never been "washing," but "death and Resurrection." So, Paul's question would remain unchanged: If you are now safely on the side of life, why would you go back to the reign of death? If you've been set free, why would you willingly return to a life of slavery?

"Should we continue in sin, so that God's grace may all-the-more abound?" And, Paul replies, "You've been rescued. You've been set free. What do you think?"

"And, as the father met them on the road, the son said, 'Father, I know that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Welcome me again as you did before.' And, the father said unto him,...."

So, what do you think the father said? Did he kill another fatted calf? Did he put his son on probation? Or, did he turn his son away? You be the Bible scholar here. You be the theologian!

Amen