

Romans 6:12-14

When cancer is detected somewhere within the body, doctors if they are able to , will surgically cut down to the cancer and remove it from the body. After surgery, the patient is not, however, declared “cancer-free.” Chemotherapy or radiation may follow because it is the nature of cancer to spread. Cancer cells, although miniscule, will be left in the body even after surgery, and unless they are destroyed, they will grow and spread and the last state of the patient will be worse than the first.

This is exactly how sin operates within you and me. There are a great many Christians living on the edge of the cliff because they do not recognize the power that sin has within them. “Since my sin is forgiven, I have nothing to fear...right?” Wrong! Martin Luther writes on Psalm 51, “*It is not enough that sin is forgiven through grace, for through our infirmity we fall right back into sin. Therefore we want sin not only to be forgiven, but to be completely removed.*”

When Jesus forgave the woman who was caught in adultery, He did not free her from the responsibility to fight against sin for the rest of her life. Rather, He told her, “*Go and sin no more.*” Had she believed that now that she was forgiven, she could live how she pleased, the remnants of sin that remained in her would have risen up to overpower her, and her last state would have been worse than her first.

“*Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies,*” writes St. Paul in Romans 6. But how can sin reign in us if we are forgiven of all sin? Jesus did indeed crush the Serpent’s head for you. But if you have ever stepped on the head of a snake to kill it, you know that the head will still quiver, though crushed, and its tail will still thrash about. Just so, Satan, though crushed by Jesus’ death and resurrection, quivers and thrashes about among us, and remnants of poison from his fangs remain in us after baptism, and unless we battle against this sin in us, it will overpower us, drive us away from the Word and Sacraments of our Lord, and destroy us.

Last week we heard about the battles taking place in Iraq. “But I thought we won that war,” some will say. That’s exactly what Al Qaeda wanted us to think. Like cancer cells hiding somewhere in a body, these terrorists waited patiently for their opening. As long as even one Al Qaeda member still lives, no country in the Middle East, or anywhere for that matter, is safe. You won the war in your baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. Jesus secured a decisive victory over sin, death, and hell through His sufferings and death and His triumphant resurrection. This war He won for you, and He gives you the victory in your baptism. Because your sin is forgiven, it cannot rise up to accuse you and condemn you. But woe to the Christian who believes that since he is forgiven of all sin, he is rid of all sin in his body. His smug attitude will be his ruin. As Al Qaeda is intent on taking Iraq, and as cancer spreads to take over the body, so the remnants of sin within that smug Christian, even though they are forgiven, if unchecked, will take over not only his body, but his eternal soul.

Am I being clear on this? In baptism you won the war. But also, now that you are baptized, you must battle against sin each and every day or you will lose everything in the end. Yet, God does not leave you to battle sin on your own. When Paul writes, “*Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies,*” he says this because he knows that through your baptism into Christ, it is Jesus who

now reigns in you. And Jesus gives you His Holy Spirit to fight against sin for you. This is a great comfort, for if God left us to battle sin on our own, not one of us would survive. After surgery, a cancer patient is not left to battle the remaining cancer cells on his own. He is given medicine, and that medicine fights for him. Your medicine is the Word of God--the Word that comes into your ears, and the Word you consume in the Supper of your Lord. Without this medicine, no baptized Christian would endure to the end. But those Christians who faithfully seek this medicine and trust it to do its work within them, will most certainly endure.

The Holy Spirit is He who battles sin from within you. And the Holy Spirit simply will not come to you to fight for you apart from Jesus' Word and Sacraments. Do you understand now why not only I, as your pastor, but each and every pastor you had did this--strongly invites and encourages you to be faithful in hearing and studying the Word of God, and faithful in eating and drinking His Sacrament? And still so many fall away from these precious gifts. It is a deception of Satan. Luther saw it clearly. He writes about smug Christians who stay away from where the Spirit is at work in Word and Sacrament, that these "*lose the faith and develop opinions that resemble faith, but actually come from the devil.*" Thinking they have faith, therefore, they are led further and further away from the Word of God. They are smug and confident in their faith, even though their faith, not being born of the Spirit through Word and Sacrament, is but a lie and deception of Satan.

This is not how Jesus reigns within you. He reigns in you through His Word which comes into you. He reigns in you, not to drive you away from His words; away from His Holy Supper, but to create in you a hunger for these vessels of grace through which He delights in coming to make your heart His throne. If that hunger, that desire is not there, then it's not faith, not Christ reigning in the heart, but sin.

"*Let not sin reign,*" writes the Apostle. This is not a command as much as it is an invitation...an invitation to make the words of Jesus and His Sacraments your home and dwelling place. Sin cannot reign in the heart where Jesus is reigning. Sin cannot gain the upper hand in the Christian who is faithfully gazing upon the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. God's mercy is greater than your sin, friend. In my own life there have been countless times when the sin in me would have mastered me and carried me away. But God always acted in mercy to bring me back to my baptism, back to Jesus who died to forgive me and whose strength is greater than the weakness of my sinful flesh. And has not God done the same thing for you? This church building would be sitting empty today except that God is still working in love. He does not leave you to the power of your sin. He keeps bringing you back--back to your baptism into Christ, back to His assuring promises.

It should, and does frighten us when we see how easily we fall and are mastered by the sin in us. But do not stay alarmed in your fear. Gaze upon your crucified Lord. He died for you. You are forgiven. He is not against you. He is for you. And through His words coming into your ears today, Jesus is removing from you the cancer cells of sin, and He is taking His place within your heart to reign there as your loving Lord and forgiving Savior. Satan, that deadliest of all Al Qaeda terrorists, must leave when Jesus comes in to reign in you.

And so you need not leave here today frightened or worried, but confident and assured. Depart in peace, friend. Jesus has put His words within your ears this day, and He has made your heart His throne. You now enter this week forgiven and restored. Sin will not reign within you, not with Jesus there. Amen.