

**WE BELONG TO THE LORD**  
**Sermon for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2020**  
**Romans 14:7-8**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Romans 14:7-8: **<sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> For, if we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There are many false gods in our world, with lots of ways that people believe they can come closer to these gods. In our world, money is something that a people worship and will do almost anything to get it. In the ancient world, temple prostitution was said to bring people close to their false gods. The prophet Hosea had warned the people of Israel against having sex with temple prostitutes in rituals honouring Canaanite fertility gods.<sup>1</sup> Sometime later, Judah's King Josiah tore down buildings that housed "male prostitutes"<sup>2</sup> who served in the worship of Canaanite gods.

While something like temple prostitution indeed sounds repulsive to our ears, it does demonstrate something universal: the understanding that the world, not long after creation when sin entered, is out of our control, and in need of divine intervention. The undeniable fact is that the world is not in our control; we need help and the understanding that God is with us. The difficulty is that we see evidence on the contrary, and perhaps wonder whether He is with us or not.

Where is God when bad things happen? Where is God when terrorists strike, when earthquakes happen, when fires or floods hit? Where is He when illness strikes or families are divided? Remember these words from Jesus, "*In the world you have distress. Nevertheless, have courage! I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). Other religions look at all the world's horrors and think that it is necessary to take dramatic action to get their gods on their side. The Bible, however, reveals that the true God is different. The God of Scripture teaches us that when we find ourselves in distress, He is there with us. His presence and His promise is far greater than good times or bad times, far greater than life and death. Paul spells this out when he writes, "**For, if we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.**" So where is God when these things happen? He is with His people, and God's people are being gathered as His own.

The reason there are so many different religions that even today carry out evil acts is that people universally perceive they're separated from God. The cause of this perception *and reality* is sin. Isaiah once wrote that because of sin, "*The LORD God has hidden His face, so that He does not hear*" (Is. 59:2). Sin separates humans from God. He is holy, perfect, and separate from all imperfection. Humans are sinful, imperfect, and profane. This was true for Adam and Eve after their disobedience. It was true for Abraham. It was as true for Isaiah and the people of his day as it is for us. Surely we must realise that our survival depends on somehow getting back together with Him. Also, is there any reason we can point to that He should want to be together with us or help us? This causes people to take strange and extreme actions in an attempt to draw near to Him. Of course, idol worship just makes things worse, no matter what we make as that idol.

Furthermore, idol worship is more than just an act of the deceived; it causes people to harm others in both earthly and heavenly ways. The deadliest way is in causing people to miss the only salvation available to them. Idolatry wastes our lives doing things that can't possibly help our cause, and that turn us *away* from our only source of help.

In addition to all this, idolatry causes us to hurt each other as well. When people lie, cheat, steal, neglect their families, sell their bodies for the sake of their god - money, or whatever it is - everybody is hurt. Look at the Ten Commandments. The worship of false gods - whether we call it that or not - has led to a violation of every commandment. Do people forsake their parents for their false gods? Just visit a nursing home, and you will find many who are parents but have been left there to

<sup>1</sup> Hosea 4:10-19

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 23:7

die. Their families hardly ever, if at all, visit. Do people kill for their false god? Visit an abortion clinic. Do people commit adultery for their false gods? Look at the temple prostitution in the ancient and modern worlds. For that matter, look at the streets of any major city in the world and see what people are willing to sell for money. Do people steal, lie, covet for their gods? History is filled with examples. False gods cause death, terrorism, and pain, and all of us suffer for it. Ironically, the more people worship these false gods, the more we all feel separated and miserable. Only the true God genuinely *calls us* away from these evils.

Today, Paul writes that God has put an end to the separation we universally perceive. He says, **“For, if we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”** All of the false religions of men teach what *we* must do to make ourselves right with a god and what *we* have to do to end the separation. But in Christ, God has taken the initiative by sending His only Son. God has taken the initiative by dying in our place, and that has taken away wrath and shame and sin and separation. God has gathered us to Himself. And notice: *God* has gathered us to Himself; God has done it all. Belonging to the Lord is an act of grace. The revelation that comes through Christ in Holy Scripture teaches us that it’s not our doing. In fact, this is the single point that’s unique about Christianity.

The people, therefore, whom God gathers through His gracious work are His own. Luther writes in his explanation of the Second Article, *“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.. that I may be His own.”* This is where the word *holy* comes from too. “Holy” isn’t a comment that you’re a moral person - even though that’s what many people think it means. Calling something holy is a statement of possession. It means that something belongs to God. The holy Church is the Church that belongs to God. The Holy Bible is the book of God’s words and revelation. Holy Baptism is a sacrament of His making and institution. It belongs to God. We are His holy people; His Word and Sacraments have made us holy, through the power of the resurrection. That is to say; we belong to Him. Again, speaking through the prophet Isaiah He says, *“Do not be afraid! For I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are Mine”* (43:1). The verb ‘redeem’ implies that God’s people are helplessly trapped and unable to gain their own release. But God says, *“Do not be afraid! For I have redeemed you.”* What an unexpected word of comfort and grace!

Now, going back to Paul, if he had stopped here, by reminding us that we belong to the Lord, that would have been enough for us to live eternally and blessedly. But Paul cannot stop with this joyful, simple reminder because, unfortunately, we sinners continually forget to whom we belong and why. Because we all have sinful natures, we are drawn away from Him and start living like our lives are our own. That doesn’t sound too bad until we realise that the consequence of being our own person is separation from God and the evils that that brings. If we live for ourselves, we die alone. If we live for ourselves, we dive headlong into a pool of sin and misery, which not only causes us grief, but hurts and destroys the lives of those around us. Perhaps the most significant statement of how dangerous it is to live separated from God is what He was willing to do to save us from the situation. If separation from God is bad enough that Jesus thought it worthwhile to be tortured and die to save us from it, are we really going to be happy if we go back to living for ourselves? God wastes nothing, especially the treasured life of His Son. In the cross, we see what our sinful hearts may not tell us. The torture and death of the innocent Son of God is preferable to what happens if we are separated from God.

Every day, through hundreds of temptations and hundreds of decisions, we are called to declare to whom we belong. Will I succumb to the temptation of the colleague at work who’s shown signs she’d like me to seduce her? I cannot! I belong to someone else. Will I steal if I can get away with it? I cannot! Not only does the property belong to someone else, but I belong to someone else. Will I run away and not speak my faith because my friends don’t want to hear it? I cannot! I’m the Lord’s man. I belong to Him; I don’t live for myself. Every time we defy temptation and act in accordance with God’s Word, we confess the One to whom we belong.

As it turns out, that ultimately is the only thing that really matters. In this world, we really think that *our* decisions, *our* lives, *our* institutions matter significantly to the future of our world. They don’t. As the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us more pointedly than any other book on earth, *“everything is meaningless.”* At least, things are meaningless as they relate to our lives and our world. Everything dies; everything breaks; everything in this world is subject to chance and change. Glory is fleeting, and our treasures here don’t last. The real meaning of the things we possess and the life that we live is that all of them allow us to confess and declare to whom we belong. Every situation, every trial, every temptation, and every day is a new occasion for this confession. **“For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> For, if we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”**

This way and understanding of life as *holy*, that is, “belonging to the Lord” doesn’t just affect our individual lives - it changes the way we live with others too. What’s most important? What makes them important in our lives? The answer is the same: *they* belong to the Lord. We confess Him by encouraging and nurturing the faith of those who belong to the Lord, especially those who are weak in their faith. Remember what Paul wrote? “*Welcome the person who is weak in the faith but not that you may get into quarrels about opinions!*” (Romans 14:1). It is far too easy for us, once we start making a point of living a holy life, to judge others in disputable or unimportant matters.

In whatever way the Lord has given us to live with them, we should always remember that our goal is to help them be preserved in the life Christ has given them. It calls for love, tolerance, patience, understanding, and sometimes sacrifice. But after all, doesn’t that describe the Son of God? He certainly confronted sin in people’s lives; however, He always did so with an eye on the cross. Ultimately, Christ knew that getting everyone to live a moral life still wouldn’t save anyone. Their morality and obedience were not as important as their salvation. Morality and obedience without holiness, behaving without belonging to God, still ends in damnation.

So what kind of people are we to be? ***Holy, the people who belong to God***. He gathers us and feeds us the sacred meal of His people. He builds us up with His Word and Sacraments, and we respond to Him with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We call on His name, on behalf of those who are in need, remembering that they belong to Him. We forgive one another our sins. We do not take the time to judge others’ sins, weak faith, or shortcomings. We have enough of our own, and they still belong to the Lord. We all bear His eternal name and promise bestowed and eternally given to us as a sign that we belong to Him. When we go forth from this place, we shall be His people in dispersion. But next week He’ll gather His people before His altar again, and we’ll be reminded to whom we belong and the price He has paid for our redemption. He is our God, and we are His people gathered in His name. May it be so. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord our God, we rejoice to stand in Your presence and to come before You in prayer, praise, and thanks through Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. We thank You for showing us Your power and glory in this vast universe, and for enabling us to see Your majesty and might in the creation around us. We praise You for filling the earth with life and goodness, and for renewing it continually according to Your laws. Help us to harvest the fruit of honest effort, to find joy in the coming of each new day, and to rest in the peace of each night.

Above all else, we thank You for the gift of Your only Son Jesus Christ, and for revealing Yourself and Your saving love to us through Him. We praise You for His holy life of true manhood, for His innocent sufferings and death on our behalf, and for His glorious resurrection to eternal life, so that, through Him, we have the forgiveness of our sins, the power to conquer all evil, and the sure gift of eternal life. Bring us finally to the everlasting kingdom that You have promised us through Your Son.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Word to be the lamp to light our path through life. Give us Your Spirit that we may listen to Your Word with eager understanding. Enrich our lives with the endurance and the encouragement that the Scriptures give, and fill us with hope, now and for ever. Lead us by the Spirit, so that we may not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Teach us to ignore the desires of our sinful natures. Give us confidence that there is wisdom in Your commandments, and grant that we may take delight in them. Fill our lives with the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, humility, patience, goodness, and faithfulness.

We pray for Your Church. Rule and direct it to accomplish Your purposes and plans. Defend it against all error and doubt, and keep it in the truth. Make it alive by Your grace, that it may seek to praise You in every good work.

Uphold all leaders in our land. Help them to know and follow Your will, so that they may maintain law and order with firmness and love, and so that we may live in peace and quietness, and serve You without hindrance.

Bless our homes. Guide all parents that Your Word and will may have pride of place in their lives. Help the young to live in the light of Your Word and to know the happiness of a life of faith and purity.

We pray for all who are facing hardship, sickness, suffering, and danger. Fill their lives with Your grace, and hold before them the perfect peace of Christ.

These prayers, and all our unspoken desires, and anything else we should have asked of Your mercy, give us for the sake of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)

Genesis 50:15-21

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers realised that their father was dead, they asked, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and actually pays us back for all the evil that we have done to him?"

<sup>16</sup> They sent a messenger to Joseph to say: "Before your father died, he left these instructions, <sup>17</sup> 'This is what you are to tell Joseph: "We are begging you, please forgive the crime and the sin that your brothers committed against you, because they did evil to you!"' So now, please, forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father!"

Joseph wept when their message came to him. <sup>18</sup> Then his brothers themselves came and threw themselves down before him. They said, "See! We are your slaves."

<sup>19</sup> However, Joseph told them: "Do not be afraid! For am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> Although you planned evil against me, God has planned good to come from it, to accomplish what is so this day, the preservation of the lives of many people. <sup>21</sup> So now, do not be afraid! I shall provide for you and your little ones."

He reassured them with words that touched their hearts.

Romans 14:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Welcome the person who is weak in the faith but not that you may get into quarrels about opinions! <sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, but another person, who is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> The person who eats should not despise the person who does not eat, and the person who does not eat should not criticise the person who eats! For God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to criticise someone else's servant? It is with reference to his own master that he succeeds or fails. He will also succeed. For the Lord can make him succeed. <sup>5</sup> For one person thinks that one day is better than another is, and another person thinks that every day is alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind! <sup>6</sup> The person who observes the day observes it to the Lord. The person who eats eats to the Lord. For he gives thanks to God. The person who does not eat refrains from eating to the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> For, if we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For Christ died and became alive again for this purpose: that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. <sup>10</sup> However, why do you criticise your fellow-Christian? Or why do you too despise your fellow-Christian? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup> For Scripture has said: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before Me, and every tongue

will make confession to God.'" <sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked Him, "Lord, how often shall I forgive my brother when he keeps sinning against me? Up to seven times?"

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered him, "I tell you, not up to seven times but up to seventy times seven.

<sup>23</sup> "That is why the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he had begun to settle accounts, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since this slave could not pay the debt, the master ordered that he should be sold, with his wife, children and all that he had, and that payment should be made. <sup>26</sup> Therefore, the slave fell on his knees, bowed low before him and asked: 'Be patient with me! I shall pay everything back to you.' <sup>27</sup> The master of that slave felt compassion for him, freed him and forgave him his debt.

<sup>28</sup> "However, when that slave had gone out, he found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii. He took hold of him and began to choke him. He said, 'Pay what you owe!' <sup>29</sup> Therefore, his fellow slave fell and begged him, 'Be patient with me! I shall pay you back.' <sup>30</sup> However, he refused. Instead, he went off and put him into prison until he should pay back what he owed. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were very sad and went and told their own master everything that had happened. <sup>32</sup> Then his master sent for him and said to him: 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not also have pitied your fellow slave as I had also pitied you?' <sup>34</sup> His master was angry and handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back all that he owed.

<sup>35</sup> "That is also what My Father in heaven will do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart."