

March 6, 2005
4th Sunday in Lent
Romans 8:1-10
Pastor Ott

Power for Guilt Free Living

I don't know if you've got something like this at your house, but at our house we have a drawer that kind of collects everything—pencils, scissors, all kinds of stuff. It's just a big junk drawer. One of the things in the junk drawer often is batteries. When those Game Boys run out of juice, what do the kids do? They run there, get the batteries out, and what do they do with the batteries that are no good? They drop them right in the drawer next to the batteries that are good, right? So then the next time you are looking for that AA battery and you go to get it. You get everything set up. You sit down. If it's something important, not like a Game Boy, but like a remote control, then you point it and push it and it doesn't work because they put the dead battery right back there in the drawer.

A dead battery is pretty useless. It doesn't belong anywhere but in the garbage or some place to get rid of it. Not some place where someone is going to try to use it and try to get more power out of it, because it's just not there.

When it comes to the whole scheme of life, power for Game Boys or remote controls isn't that important. We can live without them. But this idea of something that's powerless and where to find true power is in our text this morning. But it's a power that is a much more important power. It's a power that answers some of the eternal questions that we face as we live in this world. Our God talks to us this morning about power for living free from the fear of death.

Fear of death—that's something we all know about, isn't it? Whether it's a child that loses their pet for the first time and they see what death is and they realize that they don't like it. Or whether it's us, later in life, as we see loved ones dying, or maybe ourselves facing death—there is a natural fear that comes. Because death is not something we can overpower. It's not something we can overcome. Death also is that reminder that we are sinners—that we are not the creatures that can live forever as God would have first intended when he made this world. But because Adam and Eve sinned, we are born in sin, and we are born facing death unless Christ returns first.

So this idea that we can live free from the fear of death, that there is a power that frees us from the fear of death, is a great and a wonderful thing. It's something that touches each of us where we live or where we are going to be living sometime during our life. There are two different places that people might look for this kind of power. One Paul talks about through the Holy Spirit this morning is the law. But what we find out when we look at the law and the law's ability to give us that kind of power, we find out that the law is one of those dead batteries in the drawer. It has no power to free us from the fear of death.

Then we consider the gospel. As our God talks to us this morning about Jesus' life and death in our place and the Spirit's gift of making that our own through faith, we see that in the gospel we have an unending power supply. Something that sustains us and helps us no matter what we face in life because it frees us from the fear of death.

God tells us that there is no condemnation. That's what we want to hear. We don't want to deal with guilt. We don't want to carry it around. But notice where he tells us it is. He doesn't say there is no condemnation for those who keep the law perfectly. He can't say that, because inside of you and inside of me there is sin. There are all of these things that make us worthy of condemnation. We can't deny it. We can't hide it. We might hide it from each other. But we certainly don't hide it from ourselves unless we are awfully good liars. And we obviously can never hide it from God.

That's only what the law can do for us. He says what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature. The law is powerless to take away the fear of death. It's powerless because you and I can't look at the law and say, "Yes, I've done that. I've done that. I've done that." And check it all off. Because when you get through the scripture in its entirety, you see what God says about the law—that it's not just "you shall not murder" but "anyone that hates his brother is a murderer in his heart". And you and I hate. You and I envy. You and I lust. You and I have all kinds of these things that we trip over in our daily lives. So the law has lost its power. There's nothing we can tap into there. Because think about it, think about how you and I approach the law. The sinful mind does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so, as we are told this morning. Think of how it is when you've got any rule that is given to you, whether you are a kid in school, or in the workplace, or any place in your life. What do you do with that usually? You figure out what's the least you can do and still be meeting the guidelines, right? Then you try to hide behind, "Well it says you shouldn't do this and I didn't do it actually, I just did something like it". You're always looking for the easiest way out, something that you can defend as, "I have done it", but you haven't really done it.

The law doesn't give us any power, because you and I with our sinful nature are constantly looking for ways around the law. Then when we trip up over the law, instead of saying, "I have sinned", we say, "Yes, but he sinned worse. She sinned worse. Look at what they did. Teacher, you should be punishing them, not looking at me." That's why the law is powerless. There's nothing it can offer us. We can't say, "I have done everything and now, God, you owe me heaven." Because the fact of the matter is that when we look at the law, we see just how much we have sinned. It's that mirror that shines brightly and reveals all of our flaws and weaknesses. The law can only bring about death, because that's what in us as sinners.

That's why it's so important that we recognize that we never want to say to God, "You owe me this, or you owe me that," because we can never do anything to demand a thing from God. As sinners, all of our righteous acts are like filthy rags. None of them can lead us to say, "God, you owe me something."

But our God tells us this morning that we don't have to look to that power source. That power source is useless, it's empty, and it's worthless to us. But for those who are IN

CHRIST, there is now no condemnation for those who are IN CHRIST. To be IN CHRIST means to believe that Jesus lived and died in our place. How do I know if I am IN CHRIST? Does the Spirit of God live in me?

We don't look to just subjective things like my feelings, because my feelings can go up and down. I feel strong one day, and I feel weak the next. If I'm in the middle of those weak things, and I'm looking to myself saying, "Does the Spirit live in me? It doesn't feel like it today." Then I'm going to wonder, "Am I really now condemned?" But you and I have rock-solid truth to go back to when we learn what it means to be IN CHRIST. It means we are in his love, his perfection, his life and death on the cross—the fact that he met every aspect of the law perfectly in our place, and now God gives that to us as a gift. There is no condemnation for us, because the righteous requirements of the law have been met fully in us. Not by us. They have been met in us because the Spirit lives in us. I can be certain the Spirit lives in me because I am a baptized child of God. The Spirit was poured out into my heart when I was clothed with the righteous requirements of God. I can be certain the Spirit lives in me because he comes to me through the Lord's Supper, through the very body and blood that was given and shed for me. He comes and he washes my sins away, and he strengthens my faith and my trust in God. I can be certain I am in the Spirit because the Spirit comes to me through the Word, and he strengthens my faith as I spend time with him day after day.

Yes, it's a struggle at times. We have that sinful nature. That sinful nature wants to push us back into the direction of the law of the things that we do so that we can say, "God, you owe me something." But the Spirit leads me to despair of any trust in myself and rely on Jesus Christ. To rely that he lived perfectly in my place, that he died in my place, and now because of that, what the law was powerless to do, God has done for me, because he has set me free from the control of sin and death.

I still sin, but I'm not controlled by it. Now I can live for God because the Spirit lives in me. Yes, I will still die, unless Jesus returns, but I will never die spiritually even though my body dies. My soul goes immediately to be with my Lord in heaven.

We have this peace, this confidence, this joy, this guilt-free living, this power for living free from the fear of sin's control or death's terrors only because of what God has done for us. Think of all the people you know in your life. Make a list for me right now of how many don't want that. How many people don't want to live? How many people do you know that would not love to be living free from guilt? How many people do you know that really want to carry guilt around on their shoulders? How many people do you know that want to carry around worry and anxiety and fears and uncertainties as they go through life? I don't think you know anybody like that.

What you and I have because there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, the world wants also. They just don't know it yet. Part of the reason they might not know it is because they still see you and I worrying and fussing and fretting and anxious and uncertain and living without the joy and peace that God has right in front of our faces, right inside of us, because you and I have a sinful nature that still gets the upper hand at times.

So the better we are at living IN CHRIST, walking in the Spirit, the better our light will shine and the more we will be able to give the answer for the hope that we have. We have that. It's there for us. Turn to the Spirit in Word and Sacrament and let him produce these fruits of peace in your lives. And then share them. Don't hoard them. You can give away God's forgiveness to every last person you meet, and God will never love you less. You can share God's love with them, and God's love for you will never be less than it is at this moment. Nothing else in your life works that way, does it? But that's how it works with God's love. That's the power for living free from the fear of death.