

"You Can't Lose!"

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30

September 21, 2014

15th Sunday After Pentecost

"Have I got a deal for you!" You've probably heard those words or words similar to them. Maybe such a saying makes you skeptical. After all, the promise of a good "deal" doesn't always hold water. A deal can turn sour and hurt us. However, maybe such a saying piques your interest. We are always looking for a good deal (mostly financial in nature) to benefit us and our friends and family. Most deals are rarely all good or all bad. Most deals involve choices, some of which can result in good and some of which result in bad. So which is the best deal to take? The Scriptures offer us a couple of deals.

The first is the deal of sin. Ever since Adam and Eve, sin has offered a great deal. "You can be like God," the Satan-filled serpent told them. You can be in control, have what you want, and do what you want. All of this will make you happy. People still believe that today: you can act contrary to the will of God as expressed in the Word of God and have everything be just fine. This is a lie from the Father of Lies.

In all reality, this deal stinks! As human beings corrupted by sin who were born into a world corrupted by sin, to live is sin and to sin is to suffer. We experience the consequences of sin in our world every day. Sin results in evil such as ISIS. Sin is the cause of disease – ebola, AIDS, cancer, and all of the others which may not kill, but make us suffer.

The corruption of sin corrupts the actions of people. We don't have to follow the NFL to see about domestic violence and child abuse. We can read about it in our local newspaper and, perhaps, experience it in our own community. Sin breaks down all relationships as we fight and yell in our marriages, our families, our political system, and even in our churches.

Sin strikes at the very core of our existence. As much as we try to ignore our spiritual side and cover up its problems with physical fun and gain, sin divides us from the God who made us and loves us. When we allow ourselves to contemplate our actions (or our inactions), sin can produce guilt about the past and anxiety about the future. That is not a good way to live.

It gets worse though. If living means sin, then dying is even worse. I've often noticed (usually while reading obituaries in newspapers or cards at funerals) how people talk about death. "Oh, his pain is finally over" or "she has gone on to a better place." Why do people say this? How have they arrived at the conclusion that death means entrance into a better place? There is no proof for this. I just think that people, after experiencing life and its suffering, really want this to be true. But wishing something to be true does not make it true.

The Word of God has something to say about those who die in sin, refusing to do the will of God. At the final judgment, Jesus, the Judge, will say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matt. 25:41) After death, the pain does not end, but intensifies and location is not a better one, but one far worse than the place of suffering and sadness where we live now. As wishing for a better place when we die in sin does not make it so, wishing away a worse place when we die in sin does not make that so either.

Such is the blunt truth about living in sin and dying in sin. It is horrifying. It is a "lose-lose" situation. It is bad for us in life and it is worse for us in death. And what's more, none of us can do anything to change the consequences of sin or prevent them from happening in our lives or continuing in our deaths. But thanks be to God that He not only CAN changes these things, but that He HAS changed these things. He has reversed the curse and changed everything in His Son, Jesus Christ.

For Jesus, to live was not sin for Him, but righteousness. Jesus was born in this world and lived in this world as our substitute. He came to obey the Law of the Lord given to us and to do it in our place. He came to do the perfect will of God which we didn't do and couldn't do. He came to

avoid the sins, transgressions, and trespasses which we all did do and were more than willing to do. He lived the holy life which God required of you and me and He did it perfectly.

For Jesus, you might think He could and should avoid death since He didn't do the sin which earned death for us. But Jesus came to die and death, for Him, was not about sin, but about sacrifice. Jesus' death was not about doing sin Himself, but taking on the sin of others – you, me, everyone who has ever lived or ever will live. Oh, He experienced everything death is about: the pain, the separation from His Father, and hell itself. But He did that, not because He deserved it, but in our place because we deserved it. He took on our sin to free us from its consequences. He experienced death that so that it would lose its hold on us. He rose from the grave to life again so that we, too, might pass through death and the grave to life eternal and hear our Lord say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 25:34)

You and I have been given a new deal to replace the old deal which said, "To live is sin and suffering and to die is even worse." St. Paul spells out that deal in our epistle reading for today.

St. Paul says, "For me to live is Christ." Notice that he doesn't say that to live is happy or problem free. He was writing this from a prison cell in Rome where he had been imprisoned for preaching Christ. For Paul, to live was to experience Christ and all of His gifts and then to serve Christ with all of those gifts.

For us, it is the same. To live – to truly live - is to be united to Christ in our baptisms and, because of that, to receive all the gifts which Christ gives. Like Paul, this is not a perpetually happy or problem free existence. However, we are free to see life in a different light now because of those gifts.

First of all, we live in the gifts of Christ. You and I all have been born again in your baptisms. We have gone from the birth in the flesh as children of the devil which leads to death to a new birth in the Spirit by which we have been adopted as children of God which leads to eternal life. In this life,

we live in the indirect presence of Jesus Christ. He is present in His spirit when two or three gather together in His name (as we have done this morning). He is present in His Word which He speaks through the voices of those whom He has called to speak for Him in order to rebuke, correct, forgive, and encourage. He is present in His body and blood which He gives under the forms of bread and wine that we might eat and drink and receive His forgiveness and experience our unity with Him.

By living in His presence, we never need fear anything now, nor worry about anything for the future. He is always with us. By living in His forgiveness, we have peace with God and never need feel guilt about those sins again. They have been fully forgiven. By living in His holiness, given to us in our baptisms, we never need worry about what happens when we die. We shall be worthy to stand before God in Christ's holiness and be welcomed into eternal life. All of these things have already been taken care of for us in the perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we live in the service of Christ. Someone once said, "When we are prepared to die, we are free to live." We are now free to live by serving others with the Gospel which we ourselves have received and believed. Normally, we may think this will be by witnessing Christ to our friends, family, and neighbors about all the good things that come through faith in Christ. And sometimes that's the case. But Paul shows that even when life is full of suffering, we can be still be a positive witness. He thought his imprisonment not only helped people believe the Gospel, but helped them speak the Gospel as well. He writes:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (Philippians 1:12-14)

Now, if all that wasn't good enough, it gets even better. Paul says, 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' In other words, living this life in Christ is good. Dying is even better. Dying frees

us from sin and evil, as well as all of their consequences. We are free from war, terror, want, need, sadness, separation, guilt, shame, and everything else.

And this is not because we are going to some vague “better place.” We are going to be with Christ. His love and care will no longer be mediated through Word and Sacraments. Instead, having risen to life from our graves, we will live in the direct presence of our risen Lord Jesus Christ. The joy and excitement of THIS life will be indescribable and beyond our imagination. A new translation of a familiar Bible passage puts it this way: “God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven’t crossed the mind of any human being.” (1 Cor. 2:9)

It’s no wonder Paul was in a quandry. He says, “Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for this is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” Paul is torn, not between two bad choices (live in sin and die to destruction) or even between one good choice and one bad choice (living in a sinful world and dying and going to heaven), but between two great choices. One, to continue living in fruitful labor for the Gospel. What could be better than to share the Gospel with people that they might receive eternal life? Only one thing (and this is Paul’s second choice) – to die and receive the culmination of that eternal life in the presence of Christ.

If each of us adapts that same way of thinking, we can live in contentment. As bad as life may be at times, see life as an opportunity to live in Christ and His blessings and to live for Christ and the service of the Gospel. As painful and sad death may be at times, see death as an opportunity to be in the direct presence of Christ, no longer needing His gifts, but receiving new gifts that are beyond our imagination.

You and I have received a great deal from God through our Savior Jesus Christ. It is a deal unlike any other deals because, in this deal, you cannot lose. For, to each one of us here, to live is Christ and to die is gain. It does not – it cannot – get any better than this. Amen.