

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost • July 6, 2014

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Romans 7:14-25a

“Christians in the Capital: Conflicted”

Hello, my fellow Christians, you who live in and around the capital of one of the most powerful and influential nations on the face of the earth. You've got access to experiences of which other people can only dream. Much of the world is in your backyard. You don't have to go far to find food from other countries, even those on the other side of the world. You can see plays, read books, or see artifacts that have a place in human history. You've got a pretty unique position compared to everybody else.

You're also right in the middle of a culture that does not know the Savior. The world around you is chasing after all kinds of experiences and philosophies in pursuit of fulfillment. Many, if not most, of the people you interact with from day to day have placed their hopes in the cold, lifeless hands of imaginary gods. Others are slaves to religion which binds them to impossible standards of living in order to have good standing with the cosmos. Your society is steeped in a worldview that would even have people put their faith in the state over and above God. You're in that culture, though, and you do know the Savior.

You have heard and believed that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son who came down into His creation to be the Savior that our world needed. We were not in a right standing before God because of our sins against Him and against each other, and so God was justified in His anger against us – you know that if you say you are without sin, you're just deceiving yourself. But God in His righteousness sent His Son to live among us the life that we haven't lived, and then Jesus went to the cross to pay the price of our unrighteousness. You have received the good news that this Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and that he will come again to deliver the fulfillment of his victory over sin. So what about life now as you look ahead to that day?

As Christians in the capital, you've probably had people tell you that you can't expect everything to be right with God just because of something that someone did in the past – you might even tell yourself that, even if you don't think about it. That makes sense. If Jesus has paid the price for our sin, why aren't we Christians perfect people? The answer to that question lies at the heart of the struggle that goes on in each of our lives, every day.

Christians are conflicted people. I know this, in part, because I'm conflicted. That's what my life is like, too. I don't always do the right thing, the thing that is pleasing to God and of service to the people around me, and instead I often take the selfish option. I follow my heart's desire. It's not that I'm compelled to do so; it's not like I don't have a choice. I do. So why don't I do better?

Yes, there are many voices out there that call me to listen to some other law for moral perfection or self-improvement. So many influencers in the world today encourage me to make my own law for life. But those outside factors aren't the biggest problem in this conflict. My sinful nature – that part of me that rebels against God and His instruction, His design for life – that corrupted nature's still there. Sin distracts me from righteousness, from being the person that God calls me to be. Sin is a part of me, just like it's a part of every human being since the Fall. Sin is a present reality in my life. I'm not perfect. But I am free.

You have heard that Jesus frees those who have faith in him. That doesn't mean that the law has gone away, though. It's still there. And it's still good, because it reflects God's good design for His creation and our lives. But by God's grace, Christians like you and me have been set free from the crushing burden of fulfilling God's law perfectly. The point of life for us who follow Jesus isn't moral perfection. That's not something that you or I could even achieve in this life. Jesus has done that. Jesus, the humble king who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the humble king who'd bring the peace that our world needs, was the only human being to live the morally perfect life, fully obedient to God the Father's design. That's why his life, suffering, death, and resurrection matter so much to us. Under Christ's cross, you can live in the freedom of conscience that comes from Jesus having done everything that needs to be done for you to be made right with God. You are forgiven.

As Christians, you and I are each conflicted. But as Christians, whether you live in the capital or anywhere else, you have been rescued: you live in freedom, freedom from the crushing burden of sin. This freedom that Christ has won for you isn't just some past event: it's yours, now, as a present reality, just as your conflict with the sinful desires of your heart and mind is a present reality. Jesus liberated you from

your enslavement to sin; moreover, he's given you his righteousness. God the Spirit is now active in your heart and mind to bring the victory of the cross and empty tomb of Christ to bear in that conflict with sin in your life. His victory will be your victory on that day when he comes again.

Even though we Christians are conflicted people, we get to live in that freedom of conscience in Christ. While we strive to live a morally perfect life and obey God's instruction, and fall short of that perfection time and time again, you and I can still stand in the confidence of Jesus' completely perfect obedience. We get to speak this peace which we have, the peace which Christ gives, to our friends and neighbors who still live under the crushing burden of unattainable moral perfection.

As Christians in the capital of Rome, one of the most powerful and influential nations on the face of the earth, you do have a pretty unique position compared to everyone else. But know that God's grace is for you and for all people. The freedom that Jesus brings is without end, and it will still bring peace to Christ's people in 2,000 years, to generations and nations yet unborn.

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This summer at St. John's, we'll be continuing on through Paul's letter to "Christians in the Capital." The epistle of Romans beautifully articulates central points of the Christian faith, and we're dropping in right in the middle of it. Spend some time in the weeks ahead to read through Romans to get a better sense of where we're at as we come together as a congregation. Join us as we continue to learn what freedom looks like for God's people in Christ as his righteousness transforms our relationship with God.

Christians in the capital, you are free. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Amen.