

## THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 21, 2020

GENESIS 21:8-21 | PSALM 86:1-10, 16-17 | ROMANS 6:1b-11 |  
MATTHEW 10:24-39

There are certain phrases people use that make us a little bit nervous. Think of a kid who greets you not with a *Hello* but with a *I didn't do it*. Or a partner who says *It's not what it looks like*. Or a friend who says *I can explain*.

One of these phrases that makes me a little bit nervous is when people come into my office and the first thing they say is *Look, I'm a good person*. It makes me nervous not because of what comes next, but because it reveals that this is someone who has completely bought in to our cultural ideas of goodness and badness. On Sunday, we confess our sins and say we need God's forgiveness. And on Monday, it's back to *I'm a good person, and I have nothing to apologize for*.

We are used to thinking about people in two categories. There are good people. (These tend to be the people who are like us.) And there are bad people. And we are able to tell the difference between the two. We don't say this explicitly, but it's the logic of the language we use. What's the phrase we fall back on when we talk are confronted with systemic issues? It's just a few bad apples. There is some distinct group of people who are bad, and we would get rid of all of our problems if we could just get rid of those bad people. One of our favorite stories we like to tell ourselves is that all the world's problems would go away if everyone was more like me.

Today's reading from Romans is all about a group of people who are used to thinking about themselves in terms of goodness and badness. St. Paul is writing to a group of Gentiles who have been baptized and brought into this new community of believers. They have received the promise of forgiveness through God's grace and been invited to walk in a new way of life. And the people's response is *Well, if I receive the forgiveness of sins, why do I need to walk in newness of life? Can't I just do whatever I want and then come back and have my sins forgiven? I can just be a bad person, and then Jesus will tell me that I'm actually a good person*.

St. Paul has a different way of thinking about this. Part of the problem with the Romans' belief is that they think they are either this or that. They are either good people or bad people. They are either forgiven or unforgiven. They are either good apples or bad apples. But Paul says that there can be multiple things that are true at the same time.

The first thing that's true is that we live under what Paul calls the "dominion" of death. Another way to say this is that we live under the power of sin. Sin is not just a way of describing things that are bad. It is something that draws us away from love of God and love of neighbor. This is why when we confess our sins, we often say that we're "in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." The issue isn't just that we make bad choices. But that the choices we make are often limited and our own judgement about what the right thing to do is can be skewed. The problem isn't that we choose evil over good. It's that we think we can distinguish between the two and that those are the only two options.

This is why Paul reminds them of Jesus's death. Because Jesus wasn't killed by a couple of bad apples. He was killed because a whole bunch of people got caught up in something bigger than themselves. Who thought that they could pass responsibility to somebody else and get out ahead. That somebody else would do the right thing and bear the costs. But, of course, no one does. No one intervenes. No one stops the process. All of our neatly parsed distinctions between good people and bad people become meaningless at the foot of the cross. Good people are good people until they aren't. And they often don't realize until it's too late.

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The second thing that's true is that Jesus's resurrection changes everything. When Jesus is raised from the dead, he doesn't just triumph over the idea of death. He also triumphs over the power of sin that draws us into death. Forgiveness is not simply wiping the slate clean. It's inviting us into a new way of living and a new way of being.

And it's baptism that draws these two things together. That when we're baptized, we're united with the body of Christ. The body of Christ that is killed by the powers of death, and the body of Christ that is raised to new life. When we live out our baptisms, when we remember our baptisms, we are participating in Christ's new life. As Paul puts it, "we have been buried with [Jesus] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life."

That "newness of life" is what the Romans are missing. They've bought into this scheme of good people and bad people so fully that they don't understand the gift they've been given. Why would you want to be good at the old ways of doing things when you could make God's love and compassion more evident and tangible in the world? Why would you want to be nice when you could be merciful? The Romans' problem is that they are overestimating their own abilities and underestimating the way God is transforming the world through their community.

Onesimos Nesib, whose feast day is celebrated today, is a good example of this kind of transformation.<sup>1</sup> Nesib was born in Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century. After being freed from slavery, he was educated in Arabic by Swedish missionaries and converted to Lutheranism. While he was in school, he lamented why God hadn't sent anyone to preach the gospel among Ethiopia's socially and economically marginalized Oromo people. And then Nesib realized that maybe God was calling him to go. So Nesib spent the rest of his life translating theological works into the Oromo language and preaching in newly formed Lutheran communities. But what's more interesting is that these new communities prioritized education for girls, advocated economic changes that raised communities' standards of living, and insisted that becoming a Christian didn't mean you had to become less African. One of his contemporaries remarked that the Lutheran churches Oromo started were unusual because they all had a school next to them.



To take the Romans question, was Nesib a good person? Was he a good guy? I don't know. Maybe. What's important about Nesib, the reason why he's commemorated today, isn't because he's a good person. It's because he helps us understand what it means to walk in newness of life. That newness of life means advocating for a society that seeks the welfare of everyone. That newness of life means rejecting the false choices you've been given. That newness of life means living under the Spirit of God instead of the dominion of death.

The point of discipleship, the point of church, the point of life is not to become a better person. It is, as St. Paul puts it, learning to "consider ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Yonas Deressa, "Onesimos Nesib, Ethiopian Evangelical Pioneer," *Lutheran Quarterly*, Summer 2018, 160-172 has a good summary of this. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/696468/pdf>