

Proper 10, Year A

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-14

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

All summer long,
as we've been making our way through Romans,
we've been asking one question:

**What does it mean
to be Church together?**

Well, today's passage from Romans . . .
is classic Paul.

Sometimes I just think,
"Paul . . . buddy . . .
land the plane."

He'll use fifty words
when five would do
and circle around the same thing,
over and over and over.

Like today.
It's dense.
It's repetitive.

The flesh is fleshy
and the spirit is spirty
and the flesh is not the spirit
and the spirit is not the flesh
and blah ba-blah ba-blah.

But *before* he gets into any of that,
he actually tells us exactly
what he wants us to know
right at the very beginning.

Open to that reading from Romans,
and let's read that very first sentence.

**"There is therefore now
no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus."**

If you don't hear anything else today,
hear that.

**“There is therefore now
no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

Christ has changed the game,
and that has huge implications
for how we as Christians
relate to each other.

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Just this past week,
someone told me they had visited family
and gone with them to their childhood church.

When they got back, they said,
“Boy, did we miss St. John's.”

“Why is that?” I asked,

“The shame and fear,” they said.
“The shouting and anger from the pulpit,
the aggression and culture warring,
and so much shame and fear.”

Their story reminded me of a woman
I met years ago in my previous parish.

She and her husband
had quietly started attending,
always sitting in the same pew.

For months,
she seemed tense—
visibly tense—
but in time she started to relax.

One day, over coffee,
I finally asked about her story.

She told me she had spent years
at another church—
a church she had helped start.

But over time, she said,
something had changed.

“The message became
more and more
about guilt,
shame,
and fear.”

As she talked,
her shoulders
slowly crept up
toward her ears.

She said,
“It always felt we were always being told
that someone or something
was ‘coming for us.’

“Coming for our families.
Coming for our values.
Coming for our faith.

“There was always
something to be afraid of.

“But then,” she said, “I came here.

“I had never realized
how tense my shoulders always were
every time I went to church.

“But my first Sunday here,
my shoulders relaxed . . .
just a little.

“Then the next Sunday...
a little more.

“Then the next.
And the next.”

She said,
“It wasn’t just the sermons.
It was everything.
The prayers.
The hymns.
The liturgy.

Even the small things,
the small words,
the small choices
for how things get said.”

“This is a winsome gospel,”¹
she said.

* * *

Truth is,
there’s a reason why we choose
not to preach shame and fear
at St. John’s

It isn’t because
Episcopalians are the “frozen chosen”
or because we’re conflict avoidant
or just want to be nice.

And it’s not because
shame and fear
don’t work.

They do.

Fear works.
Shame works.
Condemnation works.

You can build *enormous* churches
on shame and fear.

You can *motivate* people
with shame and fear.

You can get people to *open their wallets*
with shame and fear.

It’s a shockingly sturdy business model.

You can fill people
with enough shame and fear
that they spend their whole lives
with their shoulders chronically tensed,

¹ Our current Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Sean Rowe, often speaks of the Episcopal Church having a “winsome gospel.” I love that phrase. Let the record show, however, that the parishioner in this story—ever ahead of the curve—had been using it years before Bishop Rowe brought it into the wider Church. ☺

truly believing every day
that they have to claw their way out of hell
and prove themselves to God.

Shame and fear work.

But the question isn't
whether it works.

The question is . . .
"Is that the Gospel?"
and Paul's astonishing answer is,
"No."

**"There is therefore now
no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus."**

Not *less* condemnation.

Not *occasional* condemnation.

Not condemnation
only on your *bad* days.

No condemnation.

* * *

The way I think of it,
it's almost like
the operating system
has changed.

You know how when you
update your phone
(or your phone updates on you
whether you wanted it to or not)?

The screen may look mostly the same.
Your photos are still there.
Your contacts are still there.

But underneath it all . . .
the operating system has changed.
The *way you get to things* has changed.

Or, more accurately,
it's like when you switch entirely
from an iPhone to a Samsung
or from Mac to Windows.

They are intended to do similar things,
but you have to learn a whole different way.

I wonder
if that's what Paul
is trying to say.

**The resurrection
of Jesus Christ from the dead
has changed
the operating system.**

The world still runs
on condemnation,
but we don't have to . . .
because things have changed.
We got ourselves a free upgrade, baby!

And now,
all the programs of our lives—
all the apps—
run differently.

Confession
runs differently
because we are no longer confessing
to convince God
to love us.

Instead, we're confessing
because we know
he already does.

Forgiveness
runs differently
because we're no longer worried
if failure is the deepest truth
about anyone anymore.

Instead,
even in the darkest of times,
we know that each of us
is a child of the light.

Communion
runs differently
because we no longer believe
in a withholding God.

Instead,
we now know a God
who brings us together
and feeds our hungry souls
with grace from above.

The Gospel has changed
the operating system.

* * *

Now . . .
does that mean
that sin no longer matters?
That we won't mess up
and need to make amends?
By no means!

Paul has just spent
seven chapters *before* today
telling us exactly the opposite.

Sin matters.
Repentance matters.
Truth matters.
We still bear consequences
for our actions.

Grace has never meant
pretending everything is fine when it's not
or ignoring the hard
conversations and conversions
that have to happen
within ourselves
and with each other.

**But condemnation
is something different entirely.**

Condemnation says,
"Your worst day
is the truest thing about you."

But the Gospel says,

“Nope.

Christ is the truest thing
about you . . .
on your best day,
your worst day,
and everything in between.”

That is the difference.

* * *

So, my friends,
if you’ve spent too much of your life
convinced that the message of Jesus
is nothing but shame and fear . . .

if your shoulders are tense
and you’ve been made to feel
like you’re nothing more to God
than a despised and fatherless child . . .

then take heart.

The Lord your God
has updated the operating system,
and that means that
even on your worst day,
even when shame and fear
tell you otherwise,

**“There is therefore now
no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

As the old hymn goes,
in him there is
no darkness at all,
and *you*
are a child
of the light.

Amen.