We continue today in Paul’s letter to the Romans. I think it is unfortunate that we only have letters from Paul and no records of his stories or his conversations. I’m sure he and I would still disagree about some things, but I feel like I would know him better. Because the church, at times, has wielded the writings of Paul like a weapon, I know I can forget that he was just a guy who wanted to share what he understood to be good news - which is exactly what I want to do.

It’s easy to get bogged down in Paul’s language: some of that is about translation; some is about reading words from 2000 years ago (and I have enough trouble with 400 year old Shakespeare); some of it stems from the fact that, when it comes down to it, we’re really reading someone else’s mail. And we’re not even reading all of it today. We’re jumping into the middle of a one-sided conversation about sin and grace. Paul has just finished saying that sin, while very powerful, is no match for grace. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,” Paul writes in chapter 5. And as his pen comes up from the paper I imagine him worrying about folks who will argue that sin, then, is a good thing - good for business at least - because it gives grace the chance to shine.¹ Romans 6 is his response.

Before we read it, I just want to say that the central theme of today’s passage is freedom and our true identity as beloved children of God. I want to say that up front because, if you’re not careful, that can get lost...

Listen for a Word from God.

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I started this sermon three different times - at least - and every time, I wound up making the same mistake. I tried to explain Paul, to unpack what he says and why he’s saying it - what exactly he means in what can feel like a muddle of words - and that’s fine; it has its place. But it left me cold. It kept me in my head. It didn’t get to the heart or the joy of what Paul is saying in all of the muddle which is, “You are free, so act like it.”

Do me a favor. You can close your eyes or keep them open, but I want you to go back to that time that you felt truly free.

When I asked the same question on Wednesday and folks shared their experiences, their faces smoothed and they seemed to relax, even if just a little. Hold onto that, if you can, as I tell you about my moment. It’s not exactly a specific moment really. I can’t remember the specific moments, but I can definitely remember the feeling.

First, let me give you some context that I wish we had with Paul.

¹ The wording of grace having the chance to shine comes from a reflection by Marci Auld Glass on RevGalBlogPals, May 28, 2019 - https://revgalblogpals.org/2019/05/28/narrative-lectionary-romans-6-14/
My mother and father divorced when I was just one and a half years old, so I never remember a time they were together. My aunt and uncle are divorced. My other aunt and uncle are divorced, in all but name. My neighbor was divorced. Divorce, for me, was normal, and not bad. It just was what it was. In fact, it wasn’t until college that I realized that when I met new people, I assumed their parents were divorced. I was legitimately surprised when folks would talk about having to go call their mom and dad but they were going to make just one phone call. Of course I knew folks who were married, but, personally, marriage always seemed so contingent. Love - or at least romantic love - seemed so contingent.

Then I met Richard.

I would enjoy telling you that it was love at first sight, or that I just knew it would work with him, but that isn’t true. In fact, the biggest freak out moment I had was shortly after he proposed, and I said yes. I simply could not believe that we would really work out. The mirrors I looked in all around me seemed to suggest that was impossible.

I tell you all that to say that when I think about the times I have felt truly free, many of those moments came when Richard Williams told me that he loved me, and I managed to believe him. Not even managed...that’s not right, because part of the freedom was in not managing anything at all. It was not when I was able to be convinced of his love. It was not when I reasoned my way into believing him, or when I felt like I was deserving, or when I chose to accept what he said. It was when I just believed him; when I didn’t think at all. It was when I just felt his love and knew it to be true. That is when I have felt truly free.

And in those moments it seems like anything is possible. In those moments I know that I am seen for all that I am and all that I am not, and that all that is lovable. When I feel that, it’s like there’s no turning back to the scared, lonely kid I was growing up, and what I want most is to find ways to help other people feel that same freedom, that same assurance, that same belovedness. I wish I could tell you that my assurance lasts and doubts never return, but that isn’t true. Still, I am grateful to have known and felt freedom because I can at least remind myself of it on those days I really don’t.

None of that needs to come from marriage, and, in fact, it may not. But that experience, for me, gives me a window into what is happening here with Paul, just as your experience can offer you a window as well. He is reminding the Romans (and us) that we are God’s beloved as declared at our baptisms; that God sees us for all that we are and all that we are not, and that all that is lovable. Which is amazing and so much better because, while Richard is great, I also know that he is contingent. Separate and apart from the days my fears talk louder than he does, I am aware that every day is a day that none of us is promised. So to know - to know - that I am loved everlastingly, that I am not bound to anything but God - God, who created us, knit us together in our mother’s womb, and called us good - that is a peace and a joy that is without price. And in this letter, Paul is celebrating that love that is so high and so wide and so deep that it went all the way through death so that sin would have no hold on us anymore.

We can get tripped up on that word, sin. For some of us it takes us to a long ago (or not so long ago) list where drinking or dancing or caffeine, or sex before marriage, or short skirts, or any number of other things make us feel like we’re living a game of Pitfall - where you never really live because you spend most of your life just trying to dodge sinkholes and quicksand. But if we think about sin as separation then what we hear from Paul is that our baptism has
made us one with God and, as he will say later on in Romans, nothing can separate us from the love of God we see in Jesus. We don’t have to think or worry or convince or deserve or manage God’s love from us. It just is - for always and forever - no matter what.

And so, in theory, I guess we could go out and do things that will break the shalom of God - actual serious things that disrupt the web of relationships with God, with others, with creation, with ourselves - and God would still love us (after all, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”). But when we really rest in the promise of grace, I just don’t think that’s what happens. I think in the moments when we truly know and feel God’s love for us, anything seems possible. In those moments when we know that we are seen for all that we are and all that we are not, and that all that is lovable, we just want that for everyone else.

From there, there’s no turning back.

It doesn’t mean we won’t ever do anything wrong again or that we won’t ever be anxious or scared again, but we aren’t bound to that feeling of separation. God can reach into the parts of us that feel dead and cut off because God has been there, and we are never alone in that. When we have felt that belonging, that love, that freedom, we know what it is to feel something different than fear and smallness, and we can remind ourselves of it. We do remind ourselves every time we celebrate a baptism, but it’s worth doing way more often. When it rains and your head gets wet, yell, “I am God’s beloved!” In the shower, sing, “I am God’s beloved!” When you dive into the pool or the lake or the ocean, come up saying “I am God’s beloved and God is well pleased with me!”

You might feel embarrassed, but you also might feel better. To stand metaphorically (or literally) naked and unashamed before all the voices that tell you:

- You’re not good enough
- You’re not thin enough
- You’re not smart enough
- That you don’t do enough
- Or give enough
- Or care enough
- Or show up at church enough
- Or have your act together enough

and to put your hands on your hips and say, “I am a beloved child of God and I renounce anything or anyone who says otherwise” - that is a brave and defiant and truthful thing to do.²

If you ask me, the ability to do that - to live out of that place - is the real struggle of Christian life, and I think it’s a struggle that is life-long. It’s also one we can’t just make happen. If we could, I’d make it happen on all of us. When we do trust it though, it feels easy to “walk in the newness of life” or “to present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness” (which really just means helping to be builders of right relationships). It’s not a requirement. You just kind of want to.

The moments we can relax into the truth that God really does love us - no matter what - may get longer and the times between them may get shorter, but they may not. I'll certainly let you know if my bouts with uncertainty ever completely go away. But in the meantime, let me believe for you what I sometimes have trouble believing for myself.

God loves you from your head to your toes. From all else, you are free.