**O Death, Where is Thy Victory?**

Based on [1 Corinthians 9:16-27](http://biblia.com/books/esv/1Co9.16-27) and [Mark 1:29-39](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mk1.29)

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Epiphany 5

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Today's Epiphany theme is the preaching of the Gospel. That is the Good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus revealed himself to be God and Christ through many signs and wonders, but these signs and wonders and healings and miracles would have all been for nothing if news of them had not spread. And the greatest sign and wonder was the sign of Jonah…that Jesus was in the belly of the earth for three days and rose again. Martin Luther once said something to the effect, Jesus could have died on the cross a thousand times and it wouldn't have done anybody and good if it were never preached, for preaching is how the forgiveness won on the cross is distributed to the church today. It is the Word that sends the Holy Spirit and creates faith in dead sinners giving them life in Him.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus reveals himself to be the Christ and Son of God first by miracles of healing. Last week, Jesus was in the synagogue teaching, and he cast out an unclean spirit from a man, and revealed himself as one who spoke and taught with authority. Today our text continues, and so does Jesus. He continues to do amazing things. Specifically he heals people. The whole town of Capernaum came to Jesus, and he healed their sick. Jesus heals because he is the Lord of Life.

This week, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled unanimously that individuals who are suffering from an irredeemable illness have the “right,” that's the language they used, the “right” to seek assistance in killing themselves to end their suffering. Friends, I hope you can see how perverted and anti-gospel this is. Jesus, went around ending people's suffering sure, but could you imagine if Jesus went around doing so by killing people instead of healing them, giving them potassium chloride or laying his hands on them or whatever...killing their pain by killing them, and saying "**Go your way, your *faith* has made you...well**?"

Friends, death is the enemy, the last enemy to be defeated, sure, as God says in 1 Corinthians 15:26, but he is the enemy. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, death was conquered. God showed that death could not hold his son. Death is the enemy, and Christ has put him in his place so that we don’t have to bow down or surrender to him. What are we doing if we are asking his assistance in solving our problems? We are giving Death the victory. It's demonic. It is occultist. It is turning to the enemy to save us, instead of to Christ.

Friends, to turn to death as a means of deliverance and salvation is evil. God is our deliverer; Christ is our salvation. Do you not know? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? God promised Adam, “**Do not eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree, for the day you do, you will surely Die**.” Death is God's curse, his punishment for sin, woe to us if we use His own curse against the life he has so freely given us by the blood of his Son.

The reasoning of the courts and of the world...**and by the world, I mean the mindset that finds its ultimate authority in something other than the Revealed Will and Word of God**, the reasoning of the world is that the individual has a *right* to die, and this comes from a supposed *right* that a person has over his own body.

Friends, do you not know that your body does not belong to you? Your body and soul are the property of the one who created them, God almighty. An example: I've got nothing against tattoos, per se, but if you get a tattoo for the reason that "It's my body and I can do what I want with it", you are lying to yourself and to God. God owns that piece of real estate, and when in your sin you sold yourself into the slavery of sin, death and the devil, the Lord Jesus Christ, she'd his very blood on the cross which paid the purchase price to buy you back from slavery and set you free in him. He owns you because he created you; and because he bought you. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, "**Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.**"

Your body is not your own, it belongs to God. And as the cross of Christ makes graphically plain, suffering in the body while trusting in God to deliver you...that is how God is glorified in your body in a world of sin and darkness. And do you not see? Jesus Christ heals people, and why does he do it? Because they are his property, and he takes care of what is his.

"Pastor, so you're telling me I don't have a right to control my body." St. Paul has a lot to say on this matter of “rights” and “liberties” and “freedoms” that we value so highly today in our proud, modern, progressive, democratic nation. Now it is to be expected that those who deny that Jesus Christ sent from the Father has defeated death, that he will use their freedom to indulge in the flesh. But Saint Paul is clear, that he will use his rights and his freedoms to serve others with the Gospel.

Paul says, “**For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them**.” He says, “**I have become all things to all people so that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings**.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, Christ set us free and yet there are certain things in which we are not free. If God says don’t murder, and the Gospel that Christ has set us free is not to be used to ignore what God says. He says, “Don’t murder”, and murder means taking a human life. Therefore, assisted-suicide is a no-brainer for the Christian. Imagine Jesus telling John at the foot of the cross, “There’s no sense in me suffering for hours on this torturous thing. Be a friend, be a pal and kill me now, cuz there’s no point in suffering.”

What gives you the right, O man, to say there’s no point in suffering? That very statement robs the cross of Christ of its power. Now Christ didn’t seek out suffering; that would be perverse. But when suffering came his way by the will of God, he didn’t find it meaningless. St. Paul says in Colossians 1:24, “**Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church**.” And in Philippians 4:12, “**I know how to be brought low and to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**” Friends, the secret to facing suffering is Christ, and there is no greater calling in this life, then to glorify God in the midst of bodily suffering. As Job, the man who suffered more than any of us could bear, his wife told him “to curse God and die.” But Job rebuked her saying, “Am I to receive good from God and not evil?” (Job 2:10) Job said, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away…blessed be the Name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

And so Paul says in the epistle that he has used his freedom to serve the gospel. God commands, for instance, “Don’t murder”, but he doesn’t command you in everything. He doesn’t command that when you die you should be buried or cremated. Now, I would never tell anyone that either method is more pleasing to God. What I would say, though, is, **You are free to choose in this matter, but that doesn’t mean you do whichever you want**. Christian freedom means we are free to do whatever best glorifies God and confesses Christ, and that includes in our death. Yes, you are free to marry whomever you want (of the opposite sex), but how do you choose? In every choice we are free to make, we are still bound to make our choice with reference to the most important thing and gift in the world, the confession of Christ and the preaching of the Gospel.

Someone might say, “Wait a minute, Pastor. So first you’re telling me that if God doesn’t command something, I’m free; but now I must use my freedom for Christ. Pastor, your just reintroducing *legalism* into the Gospel.” First off, *I’m* not doing anything, this is Paul’s argument, not mine. I’m just plagiarizing him. Secondly, there is no such thing as freedom, in the sense that you are bound to nothing. We are always and forever slaves; the real question is, who’s your master?

Friends there is slavery still going on today in Canada and the United States and Europe, and it’s the worst slavery the world has ever known. It is oppressive, coercive, and manipulative. There are slave drivers in our midst, and the government and our education system empowers them, feeds them, and encourages them. They are ruthless taskmasters, and you are helpless under their whip. The greatest slave driver the world has ever known is your own heart. Your heart tells you what you must do, and if you don’t, he promises to punish you, to torment you. He lusts and seeks after his own pleasure and he whips you into submission. If you disobey him you are punished and so you fear him.

Bob Dylan once wrote a profound theological truth in song. “You’re gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” I’d like to revise the song a bit, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody, It may be your heart or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Friends, Christ has not set you free to serve your heart, that would be to abandon you to it; no he has set you free from your heart, and it’s passions, and it’s lusts and it’s pride and it’s self-worship, it’s slave-driving evil desires. Christ has set you free from your heart and it is the greatest liberation and freedom the human being can know. Because we are born in sin, that means that the hearts of all men are evil, turned inward away from God and you can’t do anything about it. So God did and he saved you from your heart and its deceit by sending his Son to die in your place, that the law of death in your heart may not rule you.

And so Paul ends his epistle with this admonition. He says to exercise self-control... I’d say “heart control.” He says, “**I do not run aimlessly**”, which is of course the modern notion of freedom is. Running aimlessly that’s what your heart does. “**The heart wants what it wants**” they say. That’s the problem! So Paul says, “I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

Paul is saying, here’s how you should exercise your freedom in Christ. If your heart tells you to indulge in something that God doesn’t forbid, don't do it...just tell your heart to be quiet. Rebel against your heart, every once in a while anyway! Put it in its place. That’s the point of fasting by the way, especially during Lent…to give your heart the bird, if only every once in a while. You don’t have to listen to its demands. For there is an authority that is a power greater than your heart…it is the authority and power of Christ, and he sets you free by His Spirit to listen to Him. To serve him, like Peter’s mother-in-law who when Jesus healed her she got up and went to the bar. No, she got up and used her freedom to serve him. And when you know this freedom, brothers and sisters, you want everyone to have it.

Christ healed the diseases of people, showing that Death does not have the Victory, that Death has no power over his authority. Death has lost its sting, we don’t have to fear it, nor do we have to serve it when Christ is in us. For Paul says in Romans 6 we have died already, we were buried with Christ in baptism, into death and are raised to new life in him. The big death is already over, the one to come is a shadow, and we don’t box at the air. But Christ came not only to heal the body of disease, but to preach this message of his victory over death to the ends of the earth. For when the people of Capernaum look for him and his apostles summon him to them, he says “Let us go to the next towns that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons” (Mark 1:39). Liberating them from their hearts, their bondage to death, that they may live in Christ, until God calls them home.