

United in death? (12A; Romans 6:1b-11)

Romans 6:3 is strange. A lot of pastors have it memorized.

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June 19, 2020

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I was sitting across the table from the church organist. It was at a local fast-food joint, and I no longer remember the reason we were meeting or the nature of the whole conversation.

I remember only that she suddenly put down her hamburger and recited to me these words from Romans 6: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

I say these words every time I preside at a funeral; I have them memorized. As it turns out, she, a veteran of many funerals, also had the words memorized. But she wondered about them.

We had not experienced his particular death, she reasoned. How could we? How can we even imagine "a death like his" or be united with him in it? Jesus' death was singular in its loneliness, abandonment, and pain, she said. Paul's powerful words were beyond her imagining.

And yet, these words refer to our common experience of baptism. "When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death." At baptism, we were "united with him in a death like his."

But it doesn't seem like it.

In my tradition, we commonly baptize babies and children. I have had many joyful, even funny experiences of baptism: the two young children who wandered away into the sacristy during the service; the boy who proclaimed, "This is fun! I love baptizing!" after his baptism; the one-year-old who kept removing my hand from her head when I tried to pray over her.

We have been united with him in a death like his.

I read once, long ago, that if we were serious about what baptism is, we would play a funeral dirge as a child is being carried to the font. And then afterwards, we would break out in a joyful hymn of praise. I remember reading this, but I have never heard of anyone who has tried it.

It is easy to embrace the joy of baptism: the abundant pouring of the water, the promise of new life and new beginnings, the inclusion of one more person in God's large family. But it is not so easy to embrace the other half of the image: "that we have been united with him in a death like his."

I recently saw a hand-drawn image on someone's Facebook page. It was Holy Week, and church was canceled everywhere. No one was going to Good Friday services in churches, but on this Facebook page I saw an image of the crucifixion in a picture that someone drew of a patient in intensive care. They had drawn it because what they had seen and heard there—in the intensive care unit—reminded them of Good Friday and the pain of Jesus.

We have been united with him in a death like his.

How can this be? It is beyond our imagining. But truthfully, so is that elusive newness of life that we walk in.

We glimpse it in the shimmering waters of baptism, with joy and unfettered paths before us. But there is the cross, the place where we are also united with his death.

We have been united with him in a death like us, but also we rise. How can we imagine it?