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Pentecost VI & Proper 9
July 5, 2026
Text: Romans 7:14 – 25a
Title: Christ, Our Deliverer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Sometimes the smallest thing can tell a greater story. Consider a well-used silver cup, about the size of a communion chalice. It was buried in the home of a prosperous Roman family when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. This one small cup belonging to one unnamed family told a story of gods and humans. On one side of the cup is the image of Caesar Augustus who reigned at the time of Christ's birth. He is seated and surrounded by the gods. He is being handed the world by Venus and Victory, while the god of war, Mars, brings a multitude of conquered nations. On the other side of the cup is the image of Augustus, ruling over people. That image is one of mercy, not war. Augustus is seated, people are coming before him, and he extends one hand out to the people while holding a spear in the other hand.

This image of the emperor was common in Rome at the time of the apostles. It was carved into marble, stamped on coins, and molded into cups like the one I just described. It helped people understand what it meant to be faithful. Faithfulness was the word used to describe the relationship between the conqueror and the conquered. Caesar held both power and mercy as a living god. In power, he protected his people holding a spear in his hand. In mercy, he would rule his people, and so you see him reaching out with an open hand. Power and mercy in this one figure, ruling over people, one small actor in the much larger story of the gods. When St. Paul wrote Romans, he offered his reader a description of another conqueror who still rules over people in power and mercy. This man and one true God is, of course, Jesus the Christ.

Today's portion of Romans is well-known among Lutherans. It describes the struggle between sinner and saint. This struggle is real and hidden in the heart of every person. Some people confess this struggle openly, asking others to help them. Other people hide their struggle, putting on the best face they can. All people must face this struggle. It can't be avoided by anyone, and until our conqueror, Jesus Christ, returns, we will be involved in this struggle of being both a sinner and a saint.

Paul's description is personal. It tells the story of his struggle that never ends. Paul knows the good that God desires from him, and he wants to do it. He acknowledges that what God wants is good, but he also realizes that he is "sold under sin" (7:14). Paul uses the language of slavery and captivity. His members "wage war" and he is "captive" to the law of sin (7:23). Paul knows the good that he wants to do, but he is unable to do it. Instead, he finds that what he doesn't want to do, that is what he keeps on doing! A slave to sin, a captive to his flesh, Paul cries out for deliverance.

But his story is not the story of just one man. This story touches all people. Paul's cry is that of Cain, knowing the good God wanted him to do, and yet also knowing the evil close at hand. Joseph's brothers, knowing the good care and concern they should show their brother, and yet also knowing the evil jealousy and sale of Joseph into slavery that they give into. David, knowing God's love and faithfulness from a lifetime of experience, and yet also knowing the evil pleasures of adultery and the murder that he used to cover it up. Peter, knowing the good that he wanted to do in following Jesus to death, and yet knowing the evil that he did in denying his Lord in the courtyard. From individuals to families to nations, this sinful captivity continues through every generation to our own lives today.

Paul's one small story, his one small revelation of this personal experience, is the larger story and experience that we all know so well. But this isn't the only story that Paul wants to tell. There's a much greater story, the story of God that Paul wants to highlight for all people. This story of God is a story of faithfulness. God's faithfulness to His promises, and to His people.

As early as the fall in the Garden of Eden, God began telling this story of His love. As Adam and Eve stood there, naked before God, ashamed of themselves, and unable to hide, God began to speak of His love. They heard it in what God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Here, was the first glimpse of God's promise. The greater story of God. He would send an offspring of a woman who would bruise the head of Satan and conquer in the fight. Adam and Eve lived in hope. The individuals, the families, the nations that followed them lived in hope of this promise of God being kept. And the apostle Paul writes this letter to proclaim that it has been kept, in Jesus Christ, His Son. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Paul cries out. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Here St. Paul lets his one small story become part of a much larger story. The story of Jesus Christ, our Lord. He is the One who came as our deliverer, and we delivered Him up to death as Satan worked through us to bruise His heel. But Jesus delivered us from death and from the kingdom of Satan as He revealed His power in His resurrection and called us into the kingdom of God. Our God loves us, He died for us, and He rose to give us New Life.

"Jesus Christ is Lord" Paul proclaims and, with those words, he invites everyone into God's greater story. Jesus Christ is the One who rules. He is the only true God. He has come as our deliverer, and He is at the heart of God's greater story of the rescue of His people from slavery and the redemption of all people in the world.

An artist once captured this rule of Jesus in a painting called, “Christ and the Four Evangelists.” It shows Jesus as the Savior of the World. In it, Christ stands on top of the chalice, both God and man, ruling over the world. His one arm holds a scepter with the globe at the top. He holds all power and rules over all creation. His other hand is raised in blessing. Through His death and resurrection, He has accomplished salvation for all people and now rules over all things in love and offers His blessing to the world. Here, Christ is above all people, even the evangelists appear small when compared with His higher and larger figure, and His hand is raised in blessing for all, not extended to just one individual in mercy.

Yet, if you look closely at the image, you can see how Christ has chosen to rule through His people. The men who surround Him are the evangelists who have written His message that is still being read to the world, each holding his Gospel book. The men in the back are looking at Jesus, while the ones in the front are engaging with the world. Matthew looks up at Jesus and Mark points his finger toward Jesus while conversing with John. Luke stares out over the people who are gathered and John points his finger downward. There we see two angels holding a disk. In that disk is just one place, a window in the much larger world.

When this picture was placed in the altar of a chapel, an amazing thing happened. The priest, facing the altar, would lead the Sacrament of Holy Communion. After the priest consecrated the host, he would raise it above his head and it would appear in that one small window on the world upheld by angels in the painting. That body of Christ is where God’s people meet Jesus. Yes, He has ascended into heaven. His left hand holds His scepter. He has all power and He rules over the world. His right hand is raised in blessing over all, and this same Jesus is found among His people, even here today. He is present with us, intimate and near, as He

comes to you in His body and His blood, the bread and the wine, to be your redeemer from sin, to be your Savior. Today and now.

The evangelists proclaim this message. They want you to hear it and to have eyes to see this much larger story. Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel invites you to see and to come to Jesus. "At that time, Jesus declared, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the understanding and revealed them to little children...All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'"

Here, in a very tangible way, Jesus brings you once again to the heart of this greater story of God. As we gather for the Lord's Supper, we are connected to the much larger story of God's loving rule over His world. This is the story of Jesus, our Deliverer, now come among us. The One who rules the world has lifted His hand in eternal blessing and we receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Yes, we come with our smaller private stories, the moments when the good that we wanted to do, we did not do and the evil that we didn't want to do we did. That struggle is there and it's real, and we come today confessing our sin. But we also come trusting in our deliverance. Jesus is faithful. He remains faithful to His promises. "Take eat. Take drink. This is my body. This is my blood. Given for you. For the forgiveness of sin."

Our Lord rules. Jesus is our Deliverer. In His hand is power and blessing and here we find mercy in His body and blood given and shed for you. At the Lord's Supper we are joined to this much larger story. The story of God saving the world in Jesus. As we lift the cup of salvation to the Lord, His power, His blessing, His mercy extend to us and He continues to rule until the end of the world. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.