

June 21, 2026

**Called By Grace: Becoming Who God Has Already
Called Us To Be**

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The Story of the Mask

Grace to you and peace
from the one who is
and the one who was
and the one who is to come.

Welcome back to the sermon series
on Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Today we are looking at the beginning of chapter six,
a beautiful passage, but not always easy to understand,
as is the case with a lot of Paul's writings.

And so today I am not going to start with Paul.
I am going to begin with a story.

Here we go:

Once upon a time,
in a faraway kingdom,
there lived a beautiful princess.

The time had come for her to marry,
and she was looking for a husband.

But she was not looking for just anyone.
She did not want someone who was wealthy.
She did not want someone who was powerful.
She did not want someone who simply looked impressive.

She wanted someone with a good heart.
Someone who was honorable.
Someone whose intentions were always good.
Someone who could be trusted.

And she believed that the person
with the most beautiful appearance
would surely also have the most beautiful character.

So she sent invitations throughout the kingdom:

“Let all those who believe they are the most beautiful
come to the palace.”

And many men came.

But far away, in a forgotten corner of the kingdom,
there lived a scoundrel.

He was not beautiful.
Nor was he honorable.
In fact, he was selfish and dishonest.

But this man—this scoundrel—
wanted more than anything to be chosen.

So he went to a mask maker.
And he asked for the most beautiful mask ever created.

The mask maker was very talented
and created an astonishingly beautiful mask.

And when the scoundrel put on the mask,
he hardly recognized himself.

So he presented himself at the palace,
and to his great surprise and delight,
among all the many beautiful men,
he was the one who was chosen.

And then panic set in.

Now what?

He had been so busy preparing for this moment
that he had never thought about what came after.

How could he live as the husband of the princess?
How could he keep pretending?

So he asked for one year.

“One year,” he said, “to prepare myself for this great responsibility.”

The princess smiled.

“I knew it,” she said.

“The most beautiful man in the kingdom
would also be the most honorable and wise.”

And so the entire kingdom learned:

This man would become the princess’s husband.

And suddenly, everyone was watching him.

Everywhere he went, he had to pretend to be honorable,
kind, and gracious.

Day after day.

It was hard work.

And before he knew it, the year had passed.

The time had come to stand before the princess again.

And he confessed:

“I must tell you the truth.
I have deceived you.
This is not my real face.
I have been wearing a mask.”

The princess looked at him in shock and said:

“Then I will give you a punishment:
you must remove the mask.”

That was the last thing the scoundrel wanted to do.
But the punishment was well deserved.

And so, slowly, he took off his mask.

And the princess stared at him with surprise.

“What are you talking about?” she said.
“Your face is the same as the mask.”

The scoundrel was dumbfounded.

What was she talking about?

A mirror was brought.

And when he looked into the mirror, he saw the truth.

His face had become just like the mask.
No difference.

The person he had pretended to be...
he had become.

Now there was no reason to go forward with the wedding plans.

And they got married
and lived happily ever after.

What This Story Has to Do with Us

As I mentioned in the beginning,
I told you this story as an approach to today's reading.

In today's lesson
Paul talks about many important things:
sin, death, and baptism.

All of them are difficult to unpack,
especially the way Paul writes about them.

So let's begin with sin.

What We Mean by Sin

I actually don't often talk about sin,
but we cannot really understand Paul—or even Lutheran theology—
without being clear about what Paul and Luther mean by sin.

And let me tell you:
it is different from what most people think.

When Paul speaks about sin,
he is not speaking about moral behavior.
He is not talking about occasional mistakes,
or failures of discipline.

Sin, for Paul, is deeper than that.

Sin is a terrible power.
A condition.
Something that holds us.
Something that shapes us.
Something we cannot simply step out of by trying harder.

It bends us inward.
Toward ourselves.
Toward fear.

Toward self-protection.
Toward survival.

Even when we want to do good...
we do not always find the freedom to do it.

Even when we know what is right...
we do not always have the strength to live it.

That is sin.

Not just what we do.
But what has us.

Grace and the Lutheran Gospel

And God's answer to that is grace.
Just like that.
Grace.

That is what Paul preached,
and what the Lutheran reformers rediscovered:

That God's answer to sin is grace.

It is so hard to believe
that most people immediately want to question it.

So then why should we even stop sinning
if the answer is grace?

That is exactly how our lesson begins today:

“Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase?”

By no means, says Paul.

And then he talks about baptism.

Baptism: A New Identity

And again, baptism is not what most people think.

It is more than giving a baby a name.
More than a beautiful ceremony.

Baptism is the end of one way of life
and the beginning of another.

It gives us a new identity—
an identity as children of God.

Paul writes:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

And then:

“So that we too might walk in newness of life.”

Paul says that in baptism we have died with Christ.
In baptism we have been raised with Christ.
In baptism we have become a new creation.

It is a new creation where we are free from sin.

God places us into a new reality
before we have proven anything,
before we have fixed anything,
before we have earned anything.

God says:

You belong to me.
You are loved.
You are free.

And then God begins a lifelong work in us.

Seeing the Story Again

Now let us return to the story I told at the beginning.

I wonder at what point the “ugly” face
under the mask began to look as beautiful as the mask.

Was it when the scoundrel tried to impress everyone around him?
Or was it when he finally confessed the truth to the princess?

If Paul had told this story, he would have said:

It happened much earlier than that.

The true gift was not even the mask.

The mask was only the outward appearance
of an even greater gift.

The true gift of the mask maker
was a new face, a new heart, a new life—
a “new creation,” as Paul would call it.

The moment the mask was placed on the man’s face,
his old life died and a new life was born—
and he did not even know it yet...

I wonder who the mask maker really is.
I wonder what it means to live and to die
and to live again.
I wonder what it means to be beautiful
or ugly in God’s eyes.

Becoming Who We Already Are

The gift of new life
is simultaneously a sudden change
and a lifelong becoming.

And it all begins here:

Not with our effort to become worthy.
But with God's grace that sets us free.

So maybe this is the good news we hear today.

We do not have to become beautiful before God can love us.
We do not have to fix ourselves before God can claim us.
We do not have to escape what holds us in order for God to meet us.

God meets us right where we are.
And God speaks a new word over us.

You are mine.
You are loved.
You are free.
You are no longer trapped in what once had you.

And slowly—quietly—faithfully—
God begins to make that word true in us.

That is baptism.
That is grace.
That is new life.

Amen.

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The third in a series of Sermons on the Letter to the Romans.

Text: [Romans 6:1-11 NRSVue - Dying and Rising with Christ - What - Bible Gateway](#)

Tags: Romans 6 | Baptism | Grace (Sola Gratia) | Sin and bondage | Christian identity | Narrative preaching