

July 5th Pentecost 5 Rev'd Heather Toms

If we did not know any better, we might think Paul had an identity problem even a complex, one. At the least there seems to be an inner conflict going on. 'For I do not do what I want,' he confesses, 'but I do the very thing I hate.'

I once heard of a minister who once put that on his golf bag. Or, perhaps Paul is like the person driving the car with the bumper stick that read:

Roses are red, violets are blue,
I am me, and me is I.

Have we ever hopped up in the morning, looked in the bathroom mirror and said, 'Is that really me?' That person staring back at us with the beleaguered, early-morning eyes somehow seems a stranger. We wonder who we really are. We thought we were really us, but now that we are up, we are not so sure.

We know that God wants us to love other people. We are supposed to forgive other people, and be patient and generous and make sacrifices for other people. As a chaplain, I am supposed to be gracious and always love other people. However, I am not always that way. Sometimes I force myself, but really, it seems easier to be selfish, to hold grudges, to not make sacrifices. I do not do what God wants me to do. What is my problem? What is wrong with my soul?

If we are honest, sometimes we wonder as a Christian which of us is doing it. Sometimes, it is hard to know even when we are doing those things that seem so pious to ask ourselves, which one of me is doing this? Is it the legalistic me who thinks that somehow in the external act of reading the Bible, of preaching, of praying, of ministering to others, that we are really serving God.

Maybe it runs deeper than just the face. The person inside us, the person we really are is not the person we want to be, the person we think we can be. I guess, when we stop and think about it, there is at least a bit of that in all of us. We feel sometimes like we are two people and not just one. 'For I do not do the good I want,' Paul says, speaking for all of us, 'but the evil I do not want is what I do.'

That is rather strange language for Paul. Just about every place you turn to in his writings, which consist primarily of his letters written to the Christians he has ministered to over the years, he is offering them spiritual encouragement, encouragement based on their being, as he puts it, a 'new creation.'

Paul's writings just absolutely exude confidence. He says 'so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! {2 Corinthians 5:17}.

He is writing these words to that rascally, incestuous, contentious, snobby group over in Corinth. He spends more time with them at least in his writings than any other church group, trying to straighten them out and get them on the right track. Dealing with the Corinthians is like putting his finger in the dam wall. Every time he plugs a hole, a new one springs up, and he is running out of fingers with which to get the job done.

Paul probably wrote letters to them that we do not even know existed. All we have are fragments, but pieced together they reveal a rough group to deal with. Much of

what Paul says to them sounds like a school teacher trying to get an unruly class of children to settle down and learn something, except in this case the lessons are far more important than reading, writing, and arithmetic {not that these are not important}.

Yet, even in the middle of that kind of difficult and undisciplined situation, Paul is still able to be theologically eloquent 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.' It is one of the most memorable phrases in all of scripture. {One I share often with the men in green}.

Or, what he wrote to the church in Philippi 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me' {4:13}. I read about a church that had those words painted on the back of the church sign, so that when one exited the car park it encouraged one in their behaviour. 'All things,' Paul said, 'I can do all things'. Now that is the Paul we all know and love!

Everywhere he turned, Paul was offering spiritual encouragement to those who needed it. He was a giant of the Christian faith, often holding entire congregations together, not with smoke and mirrors but through his prayers and encouragement, his pleadings and his letters.

Yet, how much more discouraging can one sound than when he says,

I do not understand my own actions.

For I do not do what I want,
but I do the very thing I hate

For I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want is what I do.

What happens here? Which Paul is it that we are to believe? Was he driving that car with the bumper sticker? Was he a golfer? The day he wrote these words, did he too look into the mirror after a bad night's sleep and say, 'Is that really me?' Would it have been better if Paul had just stayed in bed that day and not written anything?

Well, maybe so, because we all feel like that at times. There is the person we want to be and the person we are. There is the person who believes the right things and the person who does not do them. And we do not like the difference between the two.

One minister has put it this way 'It is easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions. I know people who believe they love their families but who spend very little time with them. I know another group of people who believe in protecting the environment but who drive cars that use a lot of fuel. I know a number of people who believe they are against violence in movies but who stand in line for the next John Wick's sequel, and I even know a few people who believe in the Australia democratic system but who could care less when it comes to voting.

'It is a very peculiar thing, this vacuum between what we believe and what we actually do. The theological word for it is sin missing the mark which is both inevitable and forgivable but never tolerable for those who love God.' I believe it is that 'never tolerable' part that Paul is struggling with here in his epistle to the Christians in Rome.

However, we know, scripture needs to be considered in context. Therefore, we must balance not only the words the apostle spoke, but also take into account the way he lived his life. Only then can we come to some conclusions that might just help make sense out of what Paul said about not understanding himself.

One conclusion is that Paul looked at life realistically. He knew, as well as we all do that lurking deep within us, deep within that person other people see, is the deeper side of us what some people call our 'shadow selves.'

Even for those of us who tend to look at ourselves with rose coloured glasses there comes that day when the glasses crack or break and we come face-to-face with who we really are: sinners standing in need of God's divine grace.

Perhaps that is what Martin Luther meant when he said that we are to 'sin boldly.' He was simply acknowledging the fact that we will sin. As surely as we get up in the morning, we will sin. And it is good that that moment does come, that moment when we are able honestly to admit the nature of our sin. And it is better when that moment comes sooner rather than later.

Paul looked at life realistically, and seeing that we are all sinners, he was more than willing to bare his own sinful soul -

I do not understand my own actions.
For I do not do what I want,
but I do the very thing I hate

For I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want is what I do

Wretched man that I am!
Who will deliver me from this body of death?

'Body of death.' That is pretty strong language. Well, Paul may have had something strong in mind. Some scholars have supposed that he refers to a custom practiced by ancient tyrants, of binding a dead body to a captive as a punishment, and compelling him to drag the cumbersome and offensive burden with him wherever he went.

I do not see any evidence that Paul had this in view. But perhaps that is what Paul had in mind when he said, 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?' He was thinking both literally and figuratively. He felt as if he was carrying his own corpse around with him, his own body of death. He carried his sinful self around with him like a criminal was forced to carry a corpse.

'What a terrible burden sin can be,' Paul is saying, 'what a terrible burden.' No, Paul cannot be accused of looking at life through rose coloured glasses. He saw life realistically and in doing so, he saw that we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

I have always looked upon Paul as an optimistic realist, and in that light I believe Paul also looked at life redemptively. 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' he asks. And in a resounding note of triumph, not to mention spiritual encouragement, Paul says, 'God will! God will, that is who!'

'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.'

Does God make mistakes? No. Did God work it into His design to help us somehow deal with ours?

'Yes.' Yes is the answer, God did work it into his design and that design is called Jesus. Christ died for us and that is why we who are sinners can come to Christ and be redeemed from this body of death. 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.'

We are aware of the conflict that arose between Jesus and the religious establishment. In that, continual conflict the keepers of the law accused Jesus of attempting to destroy all they held so dear. But Jesus denied that he came to destroy anything except that which keeps us from God. Christ came to redeem and transform the religious practices of the people because they had become twisted and distorted. Well, the same could be said of their lives. And, perhaps it could be said of our life.

Christ has come to redeem us from that which would keep us from being all God wants us to be. And if we are burdened down by our sin, and we can echo only too well what Paul said-

For I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want is what I do

then go further with Paul and affirm, 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!'... Our sins are forgiven!

But for what? Does God, in granting us this grace, have an ulterior motive?

Yes, indeed, God does. Well, as Soren Kierkegaard put it, 'Jesus wants followers, not admirers.' It is easy to admire Christ, but quite another thing to follow him. It is easy to believe, not so easy to take up one's cross and walk the sometimes painful journey with Jesus.

As I see it, it comes down to two things: believing that there is more mercy in God to forgive us our sins than there is sin in us, and a willingness on our part to do something about it.

So, the next time we stand before that mirror trying to figure out which person we are, picture Jesus standing over our shoulder and saying to us, 'Let us go, let us go.' If we will, if we will go with Jesus it will make up for a multitude of sin. Christ became our sin, and we became His righteousness. Let us live every day as a follower of Christ and remember we are a friend of Christ. Let us rejoice that His throne of grace has forgiven our sins in Him and may we use every day that God gives us to love and serve in a way that glorifies our Maker and Redeemer.

Lord, sometimes the burden of our sin seems too heavy to bear. It is in those times we need to see the cross and realize that Christ has borne our sins for us. Forgive us, Lord, for not accepting the redemption you have offered us at Calvary. Give us now, we pray, a spirit of repentance. We pray this in Jesus' precious name. **Amen.**

Romans 7:15-25