

Sermon – Fifth Sunday After Pentecost – July 5, 2020

Romans 7:15-25

15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin. So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

The letter of Paul to the Romans figures prominently in our Lutheran theological understanding. Martin Luther extols Paul's language around grace and faith. For Luther, Romans is the very heart of the gospel. And yet the scholarship and our theological understanding of Romans continues to evolve since Luther's foundational 16th century writing. This summer, I invite you on a theological quest through the letters of Paul to the Romans, discovering and rediscovering these oft quoted nuggets of theological interpretation and our understanding of the gospel Paul proclaims.

At the outset of his letter to the Romans, Paul claims his role as apostle, one who is sent to teach, to share a message. He aims to share his deep love of the gospel. We remember Paul's dramatic conversion, struck by blindness on the road to Damascus and having his eyes opened to the promises of God in Christ, he became a fervent witness to this Good News. As a Jew, Paul proclaims to both Jew and Gentile. It was not until recently that I recognized how Paul's Jewishness is ever-present in his proclamation. He is committed to the task of explaining the relationship between faith, righteousness and the law so important in the Jewish tradition. His is a position that sin existed in the world before the law that was first given to Moses. The law was given to the world to reveal sin, not as a mechanism by which to justify or save. Justification then comes through faith which Paul connects to the faith of Abraham who believed the promise God made to him to become the father of many nations though he be old, and his wife was barren. This is an ancient way of building an argument, whereby older traditions take precedence over newer ones, where Abraham's experience of carries more weight than the more recent revelation to Moses. In this case God's promise of faithfulness to God's people carries more weight than law to shape that relationship.

In our reading from Romans today, we conclude a three-chapter summary of how a person can live freely by being baptized "into" the death and resurrection of Jesus, liberated from the power of sin. In chapter 5 Paul explores the contrast between a life of holiness and a life controlled by or influenced by sin. Chapter 6 builds an argument that rejects the idea that we

can accept a persistent condition of sin because grace makes it all better. Instead, he offers the summation that to be Christian is to be “dead to sin and alive to God” (6:11). In today’s reading from chapter 7, Paul draws upon personal experience to reinforce his argument. His, like ours, is a very real struggle between being influenced and trapped by sin and the freedom of life lived in righteousness or right relationship with God.

As humans we find ourselves in an ongoing struggle with sin. Our world is not as God intends it to be. We are beloved of God and yet not in right relationship with God, swayed by forces that dull our awareness of suffering, incline us to take care of or create pleasure for ourselves at the expense of others. And yet, for Paul, we approach this reality as ones who are already freed from this grasp. We have eyes to see what distracts us from God, and agency – promise, hope, will – to embody the light and love of God in this time and place.

You see, sin in this instance is not about an individual moral struggle, but rather the systemic forces of sin that compel us and enlist us in its gravitational pull that distances us from the lifegiving nature of God. It’s sneaky, how often we do not know we are caught in this until we stumble upon some point of disconnection that jolts us to awareness.

One of the most meaningful pieces of our liturgy for me is a line from our form of confession and forgiveness: “We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone” – by what we have done and by what we have left undone. Way back in my Confirmation years we named this “sins of commission and omission.” The don’t dos were well known by that time, a Sunday School morality that distinguished right from wrong, but I had never really thought about sins of omission before, the things left undone. This awareness profoundly changed me, and I continue to deepen my understanding even today.

Quite frankly, it is a winding journey. At the risk of sounding smug, for many of us we have cultivated a baseline of obedience in the column of sins of commission, strengthened I would say by the love of God, of being made in God’s image and wanting to live into that promise. We manage to curb our potential “mistakes” by choosing kind words rather than harsh words, by paying for the stuff we get at the store, by telling the truth rather than lying. We certainly don’t always get it right, but we have some control and get it right some of the time at least.

Sins of omission on the other hand are much more covert. It catches us off-guard. We are often unaware until someone or some experience jars us into knowing. This has become more and more apparent to me as issues of racism have moved from the margins to the center of newspaper headlines and Twitter feeds, the mainstream of podcasts and television series. I’ll naively admit that I didn’t consider myself racist. I refrained from racist language, I have a diverse circle of friends, I believe every human being deserves love and an opportunity to thrive. And yet, as I have listened to interviews and read books exploring issues of race and privilege, I am deeply convicted, simply refraining from committing racist acts in these circumstances is not enough. My acts of omission matter too. This is the difference between, as author Ibram Kendi labels it, being racist and being anti-racist.

Systemic racism is a prime example of the persistent, covert nature of sin among us. When have I been quiet when I could have spoken out to address the hate or the silencing of voices that speak things we need to hear? How have I and am I benefitting from my position of white, middle class privilege, claiming success of my own doing or merit, when really it is the system stacked in my favour? This became so real for me when I watched a video that set up advantage in a “race of life scenario” whereby yes answers to the following statements allowed you to start the race closer to the finish line. The leader invited participants to take 2 steps forward:

If both of your parents are still married
If you grew up with a father figure in the home
If you had access to a private education
If you had access to someone capable of helping you with your schoolwork
If you never had to worry about your cel phone being shut off
If you never had to help mom or dad with the bills
If you never wondered where your next meal was going to come from

Imagine how a line of participants from a cross-section of our city or world would begin to spread out, some remaining at the start line while others edged forward with each answer. Each of these statements has nothing to do with anything an individual has done for themselves, yes just means one has been given more opportunity, a head start. I see in these and many other ways that I have had the privilege of a head start throughout my life.

I do not have the answers, in fact I have more questions and discomfort than I have ever had. It’s almost paralyzing. I’m afraid of putting my foot in my mouth, I’m afraid of getting it wrong and being attacked for my mis-step. I want to learn, but don’t want to appear unknowing. I don’t want to appear like I am jumping on a bandwagon, and yet don’t want to stand on the sidelines either. Perhaps you can relate.

And this is why, in a society that resists the idea of admitting our wrongs, our corporate act of confession and forgiveness in worship is so important. We confess, not because we have had an especially bad week, but because this kind of embedded, systemic sin persists in and around us. Our confession is much more than our personal wrongdoing, but on behalf of communities and societies, humanity that continues to turn on itself. Paul’s “I” is our “we” — we do not understand our own actions, we cannot do the good we want; instead we do the wrong we hate.

For when we don’t get it right, when we do not have the answers, when we cry out in exasperation, we are reminded again of our forgiveness and freedom. The good news breaks through. It breaks through in the words of absolution, “your sins are forgiven.” It comes to be in words spoken by the one who says to those who are weary and bowed down: “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), or Paul’s own conviction of “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself

serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” (7:25). Amidst the ever-present capacity of sin to compel us away from God, these are liberating words, promises that we are never hopeless or too lost to be re-oriented toward God’s beacon of light and love. Through the promises to Abraham fulfilled, of death overturned in resurrection, of persecution transformed to proclamation, we are liberated to seek the will of God with the confidence that God sets us free and endures in making all things new. Thanks be to God indeed! AMEN.