

Psalm 15
Romans 7:15-25a

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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BEYOND DESPAIR

The Bible has an enduring concern for our best welfare, and it presents it through an array of images. It speaks of our missing the mark, as when an archer misses the target, of wandering from the path or straying from the fold, of having a stiff neck or a hard heart, of overstepping the mark or failing to reach it. It is a beast that crouches at the door, “But you *may* master it,” says God to Cain.

It is the nemesis of the human condition and the impulse for the Bible's first story after the creation. It is *sin*. It can be monstrous—wreaking havoc in lives, among families, within the fabric of a corporation, a nation, even a world conflict. So pervasive is it that no less a mortal than Paul the apostle speaks of his own deep struggles with sin, not in a reflective, biographical way as one considering actions from a deep past. Rather, Paul struggles with it in the present, in the first person: “I do not understand my own actions,” he says, “for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

Sin has appeared so deeply mysterious that whole mythologies (our Genesis account of the fall—a myth is not untrue, but a narrative way of expressing a profound truth), personifications (e.g. Milton's Satan), and real life identities (Hitler as the antichrist) have sprung up to account for it. Yet these often serve to mask sin's real source. The truth is, we have met the enemy and it is *us*.

In his fourth-century autobiographical *Confessions*, Augustine tells of a visit as a youth to a pear orchard with boyhood friends. The orchard was a forbidden place because it was private property. Still, Augustine and his friends climbed the surrounding wall, stole great handfuls of unripe fruit, and gorged themselves to the point of feeling ill. But what lasted far longer than their colic was his mind's wrestling with the impulse for the theft. He and his friends were not hungry; they knew it to be wrong. So why did they do it, he wondered?

When we ask ourselves why we did something we knew was wrong, we are often hard pressed to come up with an answer. Standing before my own father as a small boy, penitent, scared, and looking faintly ridiculous, I remember him asking me why I did it. Why, that is, I knowingly went under the bed, retrieved a very large and costly box of band aids and plastered them all over my body so that I

resembled someone patched up from being well sprayed with buckshot.

“I dunno!” I said weakly. And I really didn’t.

It was years before Augustine figured it out. Later in *Confessions* he asked, why is it that when the mind wills the arm or the leg to move, it responds instantly; but when the mind wills itself to do something—to resist some action, for example, or to obey a moral principle—it does not obey itself. It does not fully do this thing, he reasoned, because it does not fully will the thing? The mind is at odds with itself. *The mind does not obey itself because its command is not given with the full will.* Augustine determined that there are two wills within us: one is the voice of habit and familiarity—our human will; the other one less tried, less familiar, represents the spirit of the higher nature that God puts within us—the spirit that represents us being like God, created in God’s image. What our faith asks of us (and this is what is so hard for us), is that we seek to become more familiar with that divine side of our nature, the side that seeks only what is good and right. This is a hard road because it asks of us what seems so unnatural, it asks us to do things contrary to our most familiar nature: to be silent when we would speak, or speak when we desire only to retreat into silence. It asks us to let go of what we would cling to, and embrace what we are prone to reject. It asks us to forgive where we would rather be resolute and firm. And it asks that we have faith when we would demand evidence. It asks a lot. But this is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

In a real sense the Christian life is somewhat like learning to function again after a catastrophic setback. God, the therapist, stands back, eager to help, but unwilling to intercede unless asked. When our will says, I want to do this thing, but finds itself unable to overcome its own habit, it likely falls short of its goal. But when it says to the master therapist, “Will you help me take this step?” God comes to our aid to help us, and the step is taken.

Pondering his actions with his young friends Augustine remembered a similar story about a garden and some forbidden fruit. It was a fruit, you may recall, that captured the essence of all human desire: it was a *delight* to the eyes (false beauty), it looked *good* for food (false goodness), and it was to be desired to make one *wise* (false wisdom). And so the couple ate, and in their knowing lost their innocence and became ashamed (so the fig leaves). Our desire is to experience all things, to step beyond the bounds. Augustine saw in this universal compulsion our wanting to be like God—our desire to *be Go*, to usurp God’s role in our lives, setting our own boundaries, experiencing whatever we choose. It was the exercise of a complete freedom, or so he thought.

The first step is recognizing that there are moral bounds. Listen to Paul again:

“I know the good I want to do, but I cannot seem to do it. I can will what is right,

but I cannot do it. . . . I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin. Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

His answer is confirmed by his own experience of finding aid when he asks for it, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" So, the second thing is to ask God for help to live within the bounds. Not to ask is to usurp God's position, to claim that we are our own God—all knowing. Any personal crisis shows us how pretentious that is. Sin *is* pretense; it is fascination with the illusory, and ultimately hollow, as our experience confirms. We all know how sin is immensely seductive in its power to charm us, yet it so quickly empties of its satisfaction, creating a void that refills with guilt, despondency and often misplaced anger, before it lures us again with another false promise.

The bottom line is that we are loved. But like a good parent who has released the children into adulthood, God will not instantly override our bad decisions. God cannot. To do so would be to abrogate the very freedom God gave us.

Will Willimon likens our relationship to God to a good marriage. Sometimes we think of a marriage as a limitation, he says,

. . . to be so closely yoked to another human being, to limit one's intimacies to another person, to be forced to account for one's movements.

But often in a marriage, one awakes to the realization that what one earlier perceived as limitation or burden becomes true freedom, great joy. In marriage one is free from the little games, the masks one must wear before others. Now, since fidelity is promised forever, no matter what, the promise of marriage has freed us rather than restricted us. . . .

More than that, we discover, in keeping the promises of marriage, that we have become more complex, interesting persons ourselves. In taking on the burden of the promise to be faithful to another person we really have become faithful people. . . . In bearing the burden of fidelity you have become faithful in such a way that it really isn't burdensome anymore.

It is as Jesus in our text from Matthew concluded, "My yoke is easy, my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

Amen.