

The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman

Proper 9, Yr. A: Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-15; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
July 9, 2017

The Rev. Danielle Thompson

For a couple of weeks now, we've been dealing with some fairly challenging stories. We reflected on the maltreatment of Hagar and Ishmael in the context of Jesus' hard sayings about family. We watched and wondered as God commanded Abraham to lead his son Isaac up the mountain. But no matter how difficult stories like these can be—no matter what questions they elicit for us, no matter what pushback they provoke in us—in my experience, *nobody* can get a room full of church people as totally riled up as the Apostle Paul can. There are bloody wars in the Hebrew Bible; Jesus says some pretty off-the-wall things sometimes, but Paul is the guy people are going to react to, time and time again. It was true for the congregations who knew him, for despite Paul's charisma and intelligence, his words did offend and anger others, especially when he was passionately concerned about an issue. Likewise, some folks today are uncomfortable with the dualism that we are told is at work in Paul, and ethical teachings attributed to him have been interpreted in ways both helpful and harmful. But when it gets right down to it, even though Paul is a master rhetorician, the thing a lot of people don't like about Paul is his rhetoric! He doesn't hesitate to use flashpoint words like hate, evil, death, sin; nor to speak directly to the heart of the matter when he thinks we need to go there. For those of us who are accustomed in our churches, our offices and families, to having to practice a little more diplomacy in order to persuade, Paul seems like a fierce and fearless conversationalist—but also fanatical, and fatiguing.

Unless, that is, you need him. And more often than not, in *my* life, I have needed Paul—*specifically* these verses from Romans today. Quite fittingly, I was a teenager when I first read the words: *I do not understand my own actions ... for I do not do what I want. I agree the law is good ... but the good I want, I cannot do. I can will what is right ... but I cannot do it.* And for once, instead of feeling like someone was scrutinizing me, judging me, expecting something of me that I couldn't deliver, I encountered Paul in Romans 7 and thought, "Finally! Somebody gets it!" I have always thought it was a cruel thing, for adolescents, that Sunday morning comes right after Saturday night, and more than once I sat slumped in the pews, hoping no one would hear my stomach growl; struggling to stay awake during the sermon; and mulling over the night before. I would quietly open my Bible, like I was following along with the preacher, and instead I would flip past the Gospel, past Acts, and would return to this epistle, which never made me feel condemned, and always made me feel accepted. Forgiven.

So before you begin wondering what sort of outrageous life I was living as a teenager that I required this biblical therapeutic method, let me assure you: your past is much more exciting than mine. Which is actually one of the sad things about this story! Looking back on those guilty Sunday mornings, I realize now that I could have gotten away with a lot more than I was actually up to. They say there is a wideness in God's mercy, and I completely failed to take advantage of it when I could have! And hence, another "sad" aspect of this story is that for all of the compunction I suffered around the rules I *did* transgress as a young person, I don't think when all is said and done that Paul would have been very concerned about *those rules*. Certainly, Paul was morally prescriptive—again, that's one of those things that people tend not to like about him. He

was a devout, practicing, Jewish person and cared about lying, stealing, obeying one's parents, respecting one's neighbors, honoring the image of God in our bodies and in one another's bodies. But Paul wasn't really worried about any one violation of those commandments. Here in Romans, and elsewhere, Paul is worried about something more serious. Paul wants us to understand that there is a power in the universe that is able to turn us away from these commandments—commandments that build up human life and community—and turn us toward actions and attitudes that destroy and diminish human life and community. This power is so strong, so insidious that Paul uses words like hate, evil, death, *sin* to describe it, words that make us chafe—but they are the most urgent words he has to drive home his important message. Paul looks around his world and he sees grinding, killing poverty, and abuse at all levels of leadership. He sees—and has experienced—religious persecution from both sides, as victim *and* perpetrator. Paul has been tortured; he has been shut up in a pit that history euphemistically calls a prison. Paul sees slavery. He sees the unevenness of wealth and its brutality. He sees human bodies purchased, used for demeaning things. And Paul believes that this situation is not the sum total of bad personal decisions made by a thousand different people, acting independently. He believes it is *this power*, something bigger than all of us that we can't control *on our own*: "It is no longer I that do it," he says in Romans, "but sin that dwells within me." Sin that *I participate in*, even if I am unwilling to do so, even if I don't want to, even if I hate the sort of punishing and death-dealing things that mean *sin* for Paul.

So if you think about it in one sense, this is actually good news: Paul doesn't care if you mess up every once in a while, which some sensitive consciences among us might consider a relief. But in another sense, we're left with a problem that feels even heavier than it did before; and that is the problem of this terrible force of sin and the fact that, according to Paul, we are so intimately bound up with it. In fact, had he known about DNA, Paul might have used it to illustrate our seemingly inherent aptitude for patterns and habits that reinforce, rather than undermine, sin. The illustration he uses instead is "flesh," although to call this term an *illustration* is to miss the concrete, material thing Paul means. From his own knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, from his rabbinical training, from his own resume as a finite creature, Paul knows that being human is a good thing; that having a body is a good thing; that life is a gift. But he also believes that part of being finite, embodied, *creaturely*, is a tendency to put our own best and most basic interests before others; to place survival over every higher good; to be impulsive, passive with regard to our desires and fears, pleasures and pains, resisting any sense of future, or of the whole, in our small, immediate worlds. In other words, we can act like meatheads. And I think this is part of what Paul means by "flesh."

But if Paul will allow me the same theological license here that he allows us where personal peccadilloes are concerned, I want to suggest that any time we fall back on ourselves, any time we put our faith in our own steam, alone—even when we think we doing it for unselfish reasons, trying to *break* the cycle of sin—we are still operating in the mode of the flesh. And it is one of the craftier ways that sin makes its house within us. Because just like a teenager trying again and again not to do the things his parents don't want her to do—or, trying again and again to do and be what he thinks *others* want of him—once we have identified a problem, a sin, we muster up all of our strength to eradicate it and to establish our own righteousness. We apply this energy to ourselves, and to the big systemic injustices that express sin so profoundly. We apply this moral code of our own construction to what it means to be a hard worker or a weak link; a responsible

citizen or a bad neighbor; an all-in parent, or someone who feels like they are constantly failing their children and their partner. We even try to be good Christians, or good parishioners, to align ourselves with an ideal of faith and practice that may be more forgiving than the one we grew up with, but nevertheless contains its own sort of legalism. And what is the result of our strivings? We exhaust ourselves. We exhaust other people. We box ourselves in and gasp for air, and the world is no better for it. When Paul cries out, in Romans 7, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” the body he describes is marked by this empty, gasping self-reliance.

Or we might call it “gracelessness.” The antidote to which is Christ. And try as we might, there is no more complicated answer to the question of the problem of sin than Christ—for us, and for Paul. “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” But what does it look like to be rescued from sin by Jesus, for Christ to break this power that turns the world inward and away from true self, from others, from God?

First, I would say that when *Christ* breaks the cycle of sin, we experience an inner freedom, whether or not we always do the right thing or make the right choices. We trust, with God’s help, that in the words of our psalm, God is compassionate to all; God is faithful and merciful; God upholds those who fall, and lifts up those who are bowed down. No instance of sin will ever be the end of us because in Christ, God has determined the end: forgiveness and life over bitterness and death. When *Christ* breaks the cycle of sin, our life feels more open: we receive more easily, we offer more easily. We see and hear God in places where we never imagined we would find something holy. Our self-giving comes from deeper soil, and is richer, more transformative for us and for the world. The life we pour out does not diminish us but fulfills us, and brings us closer to other people. When *Christ* breaks the cycle of sin, we know what it feels like to have a durable center, something we can turn to again and again when we find that we are pointed in the wrong direction. For when *Christ* breaks the cycle of sin, something in *us* changes, whether we always feel it or not—for *Jesus’* flesh has become our flesh, by his own promise, and every day he is working out his goodness and wholeness in us. When Christ breaks the cycle of sin, it feels like *Rest*: a place of spiritual peace where the transformation of the world is being born.