

Who's really running this show, anyway?

Romans 7:15-25

Our scripture this morning draws from one of Paul's most oft-cited letters, his letter to the Romans. In this passage, Paul talks about a fundamental human struggle, a struggle that I think might be all too familiar in this particular way to those of us seeking to disciple ourselves to Jesus Christ.

Paul talks here about the ways that our intentions don't always line up with our actions. The ways that our highest ideals and principles don't always translate into actions and choices that reflect those ideals and principles. The ways that we might yearn to live in the way that we know God calls us to live, yet somehow keep finding ourselves falling short of that.

Paul describes for us this essential quagmire of being human, and then points to Jesus, and our relationships with Jesus, as the answer to these troubling questions.

As we consider this passage, I think we can find a salutary sense of not being in this struggle alone. We're reminded that struggling to actually do what we believe is right - that's not some sort of unique individual failing, rather that's a common challenge for all of us. And we also find comfort in recognizing Jesus as the illuminated path out of this struggle. Paul reminds us to respond to this tension *not* by throwing up our hands and saying, "Well, I guess my intentions don't even matter, I'll always just make mistakes anyway so what does it even matter, I'll just stop trying to be better," but rather by saying, "I'm struggling here, and I'm not alone in that struggle, so I'll cleave myself even closer to Jesus, I'll give myself over even more fully into Christ's care and forgiveness and guidance."

So, let's dig deeper into this passage and see where it might lead us this morning!

The first aspect of this passage that we might encounter is its complexity of wording. Parts of this passage almost sound like a tongue-twister, don't they? Let's hear again the first two verses of this morning's passage, from the New International Version translation: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good."

Whew!

To me at least, those are the kind of verses that have me say, "Okay, I know what all of those words mean individually, but somehow I'm left a little lost by reading it all

together!" This sort of linguistic repetition and complexity is present in Paul's original Greek as well, and so I think we might wonder what the intention is there. And I think perhaps Paul is inviting us to slow down here, really think about what he's saying, reread the passage more slowly, maybe have it read to us another few times. Slowing down to really take in what Paul is telling us.

So as we dig deeper into this passage, I thought we might first start by hearing it again, through the words of The Message Bible, a translation that takes a somewhat looser, more vernacular style to help make more clear the message of what scripture is saying. So then, let's hear these 11 verses once more through the words of The Message:

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

Paul is talking here about the ways that our intentions to do good, to be loving and compassionate and kind - that doesn't always translate to good, loving, compassionate, kind actions. Sometimes those highest intentions to do what we know to be good comes up against our tendency towards sin, and we end up instead acting in ways that cause hurt or harm.

I think it's useful to remind ourselves here what we're talking about when we talk about sin. As we've discussed before, the word that Paul is using when he talks about sin is

the Greek word “hamartia.” “Hamartia” literally means “missing the mark.” The verb form of this word, “hamartano,” meaning “to miss the mark,” is used throughout Ancient Greek texts referring to an archer missing their target. If you were to read Homer’s Iliad or Odyssey, you’d encounter “hamartano” referring to when archers don’t hit what they’re aiming for.

So when Paul talks about “sin,” he’s talking about the ways that we miss the mark. We’re aiming for God’s intentions for us, aiming to do what God commands us to do, aiming to live how Jesus calls us to live - but sometimes, we just miss the mark. Sometimes we’re aiming for that bullseye but instead hit the outer edge of the target. Sometimes we’re aiming for that bullseye but our arrow flies way off to the side. Sometimes we just drop the arrow when we’re trying to notch it, sometimes our bowstring just snaps with the tension!

So, we want to do good, but we don’t always do it, we miss the mark.

Now at this point we might perhaps think, “Well now, if you say you wanted to do something good but you didn’t actually do it, maybe you really didn’t want to do good in the first place!”

But human beings, we aren’t quite as simple and straight-forward as that, are we? Our will - the faculty by which we decide on and initiate action - it has a lot of different motivating forces, doesn’t it?

Let’s imagine a relatively simple scenario - I’m out at a restaurant for lunch with some friends to celebrate our birthday. I’m at the table with menu in hand, deciding what we want to order.

A pretty simple decision to make!

I might first simply ask myself, well what sounds tasty to eat right now? But that’s not the only motivating factor, is it? I might first be motivated to order what I think sounds tasty, but then wait! I’m also trying to be fiscally responsible, so maybe I shouldn’t order something too expensive. But also, this is a celebration, so maybe it’s okay to splurge on the price a little. And also, I’m trying to keep my blood pressure in check, so maybe I shouldn’t get something with too much salt. And also, I’m planning to go for a little hike later in the afternoon, so maybe I shouldn’t get something that will leave me feeling too full. And also, what have I heard that this restaurant is particularly good for, particularly well known for? And also, that there sounds good but I also cook that sometimes at home so maybe I should get something I couldn’t cook at home. And also, I don’t want

to order something that takes too much longer to cook than my companions' choices, I don't want their food to get cold. And so on and so on and so on.

Even a simple choice like ordering a meal at a restaurant has all these different motivating forces behind it!

I'm reminded of a quote by the poet Walt Whitman, from his poem "Song of Myself." In that poem, Whitman says:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes)*

And how much more complicated does our decision-making and action-taking become when we're faced with a more morally involved question? How many different motivations pull at us when we're betrayed by someone we love? When we're faced with how to respond when someone steals from us? When we wonder how to respond to the myriad tragedies and societal sins of war, racism, homophobia, climate change, misogyny, and so on and so on?

Friends, each of us contains multitudes!

Multitudes of motivating forces, multitudes of desires. Our wanting to live in the ways that Jesus beckons us to live, that might well be our highest motivating force, it might well be the motivating force that we most want to live out - but there are all these other motivations and desires that all too often get in the way.

So, what do we do about all of this? How do we find our way through this moral conundrum?

Paul suggests an answer for us in verses 24 and 25: "Who will rescue me?... Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ."

Friends, we turn to Jesus. We turn towards the Divine as our source of forgiveness and grace for when we do fall short, when we do miss the mark. And we turn towards the Divine as our guiding light. When we come up against the cacophony of all our different motivations and desires, we can always turn simply to Jesus, asking that timeless question that has adorned so many t-shirts, so many bumper stickers, so many wristbands: what would Jesus do?

And so, friends, as we move through the days ahead, let us be mindful of Paul's words here. Let us remember that we're not alone when we struggle to live out our highest ideals, the ways that we want to live according to God's will. Let us open ourselves to receive compassion, forgiveness, and grace for when we "hamartano," when we miss the mark.

And still, let us ever strive to be guided by the Divine.

Let us turn, again and again, to Jesus's teaching and examples, to hold Jesus as the ultimate motivating factor that shapes our own will. Let us seek to be living vessels filled with Spirit's influence, vessels through which our daily prayer might come alive: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."