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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:28-30

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's sermon, I hope to commend two passages from this morning's Bible readings. The strange thing about these two passages is that they are both famous, both true, yet they seem to conflict with one another. The first passage speaks of rest, while the second passage speaks of anguish. I love both passages and I hope that in the end, we will find encouragement for our souls in both passages.

The first one comes from our Gospel Lesson, Matthew 11:28-30. Jesus is speaking. Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, the great Lover of your souls, says this to you:

<sup>28</sup>Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.(Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

The other passage begins with perplexity and defeat, and culminates in a cry of misery. And so we have these verses from the Seventh Chapter of Romans. Paul says this:

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?(Romans 7:15, 24, RSV)

Thus it appears that in practice, in the daily life of even so good a man as St. Paul, the Lord's promise of rest for the soul can exist simultaneously with deep distress over sin.

Let's begin with a few words about our Lord's invitation to come to him and to find rest for our souls.

Yesterday, when I was visiting one of our members in the hospital, I found myself thinking what I often think when I am in the hospital: God bless the nurses! By training, by discipline, and by heart they stay when other people shy away from those who are in trouble. When nurses see someone who is weary and heavy laden, they do not cross to the other side of the street, but stay and minister to that burdened one. It is the same with many professions. The social worker stays and lets the troubled soul come unto him or her. The attorney stays when the difficult case comes. The sheriff stays when the outlaws come. It's the stuff of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The soldier tries to hold the ground and the medic stays with the one who has fallen.

Many times we are tempted to slide away from the weary, heavy burdened one because we ourselves are weary and heavy burdened. We feel that we just do not have enough strength left to invite one more person to come to us for help. And then, sometimes, we are simply unjust or prideful and feel it below us to deal with such and such a one. We count that person unworthy of our help.

But not Jesus. No matter how weary he might be, yea, though he be exhausted and dying on a cross, he still has time to minister to others: Father, forgive them. Of all the glories of Jesus, including the glories of miracles and mastery of wind and wave, perhaps this is among the most glorious of his traits: his heart is immense, stretching from sea to shining sea, with room in it for each of us. And so we have this precious promise of our Lord Jesus:

<sup>28</sup>Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.(Matthew 11:28, KJV)

But now, let us turn to the anguished cry of someone who did come unto Jesus, who did take our Lord's yoke upon him, and who did find rest for his soul, such that he could testify continually of joy:

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.(Romans 14:7, KJV)

And yet, for all his coming to Jesus, he expresses great consternation and disappointment in himself in this morning's passage:

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?(Romans 7:15, 24, RSV)

Many of us, I believe, have taken some comfort from St. Paul's anguished testimony here. We are sorry for the torment that can lead such a good man to cry out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" and yet, we also are grateful for that cry, for it is a cry that finds its echo in our own heart.

Moreover, the saint is confessing true, old-fashioned sin, of the type we know all too well. He confesses both sins of omission and commission. He fails to do the good he would do, and, as well, he does the evil he would not do, the evil which he himself judges unworthy of anyone who bears the name of Christ. He is not speaking of anything so mild as "temptation to sin," but rather the doing if it. The saint is admitting that he too often yields to sin and transgresses the holy law of God. It is miserable enough to suffer temptation. Jesus suffered temptation in the wilderness, and though the story of his victory over the devil is calmly told, still there might have been oceans of suffering involved with that victory for Jesus. Certainly there were vast worlds of suffering for Jesus on the cross when he resisted the temptation to save himself and to thereby lose the world. But Paul is not lamenting the cost of triumphing over sin, but rather he is lamenting that he sinned — that instead of him triumphing over sin, it was the other way around, with sin defeating him. In fact, Paul indulges in no soft words for himself. He confesses not only to doing sin, but also "evil":

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.(Romans 7:19, RSV)

This is another side of things. Last week, in Romans Chapter 6, St. Paul spoke of Christian freedom and boldly declared that Christians have been set free from sin:

<sup>14</sup>For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

<sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, <sup>18</sup>and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

But now, Paul reveals that for himself, Christian freedom is a hard path and a path with much failure in it.

My chief teacher on this passage is Martin Luther and his *Lectures on Romans* (1515-16). Luther believes that we should indeed be comforted by this passionate passage in St. Paul. Luther gives three reasons why we can legitimately find comfort in Romans Chapter 7.

The first reason is simple and human enough: It helps us to know that we are not alone in our Christian struggles. Luther puts it this way:

Rather it is a comfort to hear that such a great apostle was involved in the same sorrows and afflictions as we are when we try to be obedient to God.

And so it is that the great apostle is kin to us in weakness. Thus, if Christian freedom should be hard for us now or at some other point in our life, let us not conclude that we are strange or disappointing people, for it was hard for the best of 'em too, even for St. Paul.

Luther's second encouragement from Romans 7 is also rather simple and human enough, but important and should not be forgotten. I am speaking of the simple idea that we should give ourselves credit for *trying* to be good, for the trying reveals about us that Christ is in us and is gently prodding us along the path of holiness of life.

Luther expresses this idea in terms of a "pugilist," a fighter. We are still on our feet. We are still fighting. We have not yet been defeated. Our restlessness with our own sin reveals that Jesus matters to us and that we are striving to become Christlike. Luther puts his point this way:

From this it is obvious that [the apostle Paul] is speaking of himself as a pugilist between two contrary laws, but not as a defeated fighter for whom there is no longer a war between the law of the members and the law of the mind, because the mind has given in, as is the case with the carnal man. Rather he shows that he is serving the one law, that he is dedicated to it and that he is standing up to the other law which attacks him and is not serving it, rather, that he is struggling against it.

And Luther's third encouragement in face of St. Paul's anguish is this: Though we often fail and fall into sin, nonetheless, we are mending. We are getting better, and Jesus always places the path of health before us.

Luther uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to make this point. He says that to be a Christian is to be like the man fallen on the road. We are falling, but Jesus has come into

our lives, through Baptism and the Holy Communion, and he is starting to mend us. And so Luther says this:

This twofold idea [that is, that we are both saint and sinner] cannot be better explained than by the parable in the Gospel of the man who was left half dead (Luke 10:30 ff.). For when the Samaritan had poured wine and oil on his wounds, he did not immediately recover, but he began to do so. Thus our sick man is both weak and getting well.

And so that famous Lutheran phrase *simul iustice et peccator* refers to a condition to which we need not be reconciled, but should always contend against. We might be *both* sinners and righteous, but Christ within us would have us to be righteous, and let us cherish that impulse to the good and seek to honor it more and more in our lives. Luther points the point this way:

Now notice what I said above, that the saints at the same time as they are righteous are also sinners; righteous because they believe in Christ, whose righteousness covers them and is imputed to them, but sinners because they do not fulfill the Law, are not without concupiscence, and are like sick men under the care of a physician; they are sick in fact but healthy in hope and in the fact that they are beginning to be healthy, that is, they are “being healed.”<sup>17</sup>

In confidence that he was beginning to be healed and that progress in holiness of life was possible, Paul fought on till the end of his days. He disciplined himself, so that he could testify to the Corinthians:

but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.(1 Cor. 9:27, RSV)

And in the end, the man who cried out in anguish, “Wretch man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?” is able to give his testimony of confidence as he nears the end of his life:

<sup>7</sup>I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:  
<sup>8</sup>Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.(2 Timothy 4:7-8, KJV)

This same Jesus who in our Gospel Lesson invites the weary and the heavy laden to him, now invites you and me to him. And, this morning, we come in two waves. The first one is the individual wave represented by our new member Will Dunn. As Will comes forward to affirm his Baptism, he should believe that Jesus is waiting for him, inviting him, and looking upon with absolute delight as he draws nearer.

And likewise with you. When you come forward to the Blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion, you are once again answering the invitation of the one who bids you come and who means to give rest unto your souls, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.