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Betwixt Bondage to Sin and Bondage to Christ

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

My sermon this morning is based on our Epistle Lesson, Romans Chapter 7. I wonder: Has there ever been a text of scripture that rang more true than St. Paul's verse 15:

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

From the goodness of the highest saint to the humility of the quiet, ordinary Christian, it seems that all of humanity can only hang our heads and cry, "Too often! Too often, I did not do what I wanted, what I approved of, what I believed in, but I did the very thing I hated."

This text, Romans 7, reverberates in the soul. It is similar to our confession at the start of the liturgy — a confession so very heartfelt by many of us:

☒ We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

Have we ever yet reached a Sunday morning when we judged that we did not need to make the confession that day? Did we ever breathe a sigh of relief and say to ourselves, "No need for confession this day, because I have lived an entirely sinless life this past week." I doubt that any of us has had such self-confidence. The Christian life is a contested life, and if we make it to heaven, we will probably be wrestling every inch of the way. The Christian life rejoices in Jesus and the promise of heaven, but also it is a protracted struggle against sin that stubbornly persists in us and tries to draw us back toward Satan and away from our Saviour.

It will not always be so. Someday sin, death, and the devil will be thrown right out of the world, forever. Then we will have peace and will be able at last to turn our hands to uninterrupted good work, without so often falling back into sin. Meanwhile, our world is still a fallen world, the mystery of iniquity presses on around us and within us, and we must discipline ourselves if we want to stick close to Jesus and sin less.

This is Saint Paul!

Mind you, we are speaking of Saint Paul! He is the author of today's Epistle Reading. Let us be amazed, humbled, and warned by this. If Saint Paul can speak

of sin that clings so very closely to him, then no doubt that sin clings closely to us too. I mean, Saint Paul is a man who knew such rapture in Christ that he was once “caught up into the third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2). He was a man of piety, love, gentleness, learning, prayer, and self-sacrifice for the sake of others and for the church. Yet this man who once soared to the third heaven could also plunge to the depths in which he cries out that he does not know himself:

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

If Saint Paul can say such a thing, then we too are caught amidst a great spiritual battle. None of us is spared the struggle against the sin that seems to dwell right within us and which beckons to us so relentlessly.

Sympathy for others

It is humbling to have to say such a thing, that we are still so very drawn toward sin. But at least there is this good side to it: Our humility about sin could well lead us to more sympathy for others. Such self-consciousness of the sin that dwells within us can lead us more often to that lovely saying, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

So, if we struggle with sin, then let’s have some mercy on our children and on our neighbors and on our colleagues, for they are struggling too. Nothing is easy in this fallen world. From Saint Paul to Folsom County Prison, all are alike in singing the blues about the pull of sin.

I read on Wikipedia that when Johnny Cash was writing that song about Folsom County Prison, he wondered to himself about the reasons for murder:

“I sat with my pen in my hand, trying to think up the worst reason a person could have for killing another person, and that’s what came to mind.”¹

“Just to watch him die.” It is the mystery of sin. It is that miserable, unrelenting pull within us toward ruining the world. And so the prisoner hears the train whistle blowing and thinks to himself, “I can’t be free”:

When I was just a baby my mama told me, Son,
Always be a good boy, don’t ever play with guns.
But I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die
When I hear that whistle blowing, I hang my head and cry.

I bet there’s rich folks eating in a fancy dining car
They’re probably drinkin’ coffee and smoking big cigars.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folsom_Prison_Blues

Well I know I had it coming, I know I can't be free
But those people keep a movin'
And that's what tortures me...

He says "I can't be free." Well, none of us can be free of the *desire* to sin. But each of us can sin less. Each of us can stick closer to Jesus and live a better life. Let's talk about that some. I want to talk about it by speaking of three matters. First, there is an ancient difference between Socrates and Aristotle. Second, there is that notorious Lutheran saying about the Christian — that we *simul justus et peccator*. And third, there is the Trinitarian context in which the Christian lives.

Socrates and Aristotle

I have always loved the Socrates I encountered in the Dialogues of Plato. And yet, for all my admiration of Socrates, I side with Aristotle in an important dispute between them. I think that St. Paul sides with Aristotle too.

There is a kind of optimism in Socrates about humanity that I think goes too far. I also am optimistic about humanity, but not in quite the same way as Socrates. That dear old man believed that to *know* the good is to *choose* the good. What ails us is simply that we do not know things aright. And so Socrates gently leads people like Glaucon or Thrasymachus from their ill-formed notions of justice, for example, to more noble thoughts about the subject. He assumes that if he can get their ideas right, then their conduct will automatically improve.

But Aristotle believes that something more is needed. Using the words of Saint Paul, Aristotle imagined that it is possible to know the right, but to fail to do it:

I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.
(Romans 7:18-19, NRSV)

Saint Paul concludes that there is something else within him that tempts him away from the good. He is not a pure intellect. He is an intellect, yes, but also he is tethered to sin:

²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but 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.

Saint Paul experiences himself as a kind of hybrid person. He can grasp the truth, but he is vulnerable to something within him that leads him away from the good.

So, Aristotle notes about Socrates that he talks about the nature of virtue, but not so much how to become a virtuous person:

Aristotle says of Socrates that “he believed that all the moral virtues were forms of knowledge; in such a way that when we knew what justice was, it followed that we would be just,” and Aristotle’s own comment on this clarifies its meaning: “Yet where moral virtue is concerned,” he says, “the most important thing is not to know what it is, but how it arises; we do not wish to know what courage is, we wish to be courageous.” (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1216b.) That Socrates is all of the intellectualist that Aristotle makes him out to be is clear from the parallel Socratic saying to “Virtue is knowledge”; namely, “No one errs willingly.” No one willingly goes wrong, for no one voluntarily chooses other than what would be good for himself.²

To the question, “Not what is courage, but how do we become courageous,” Aristotle points to practice and repetition. We become virtuous by doing the things that a virtuous person would do. We imitate the virtuous person. We practice and repeat virtuous conduct until bit by bit it transforms our character and makes us more virtuous.

This emphasis on practice and imitation and repetition is also part of the Christian life. We are not supposed to simply sit there as if balanced on a see saw, drawn between knowing the good and feeling drawn toward the sin. We are to actively strive for the one and flee from the other. We are to work at become more virtuous. Especially we should work at becoming more Christ-like by prayer, asking for his Spirit, by meditation on the life of Christ, and by trying our hand at that life by practice and repetition.

simul justus et peccator

This matter of sitting on the balance beam, drawn between both the good and sin, leads me to a brief discussion of Luther’s famous phrase *simul justus et peccator*. It means “simultaneously just (in Christ) and a sinner.” It is a phrase that arises from Luther’s meditations on Biblical passages like the one we are looking at this morning, Romans 7. Even the best of Christians, like Saint Paul, is simultaneously a saint and a sinner. He is saved by Christ, clothed in Christ’s righteousness, and destined for heaven. But he is simultaneously a sinner, for sin still clings so closely to him and contests his life in Christ.

The crucial thing to see about this phrase *simul justus et peccator* is that we must never let it function in our lives as a kind of *permission* to sin.³ We must not

² MacIntyre, Alasdair (2003-07-08). *Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the 20th Century* (Routledge Classics) (Kindle Locations 642-647). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition

³ A theme in David Yeago’s essay “Unmodern Luther,” 2010.

yield to temptation saying to ourselves, “Well, after all, I am a sinner. I am justified, but also I am a sinner and I will always remain a sinner until I reach heaven. I am so I am going to go with it! I’m a sinner!” Judging by the flow of the Bible, by the example of Jesus and the saints, I think that the slogan should be taken in the other direction — not as permission to yield to sin, but as encouragement that we can conquer any particular sin. The fact that we are *simul justus et peccator* means that the fight against sin is possible for us and winnable for us in any particular case, and that we should turn to it. And it is possible for us precisely because being “justified” means that the context of our lives is the Holy Trinity. We do not battle against sin all alone, but have God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit battling with us.

The Trinitarian context

And this brings us to my third point about the agony of knowing and willing the good, but being drawn by sin away from the good. I mean the Trinitarian context for the Christian life.

Let me lift up for you a passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews that I have praised before and will probably go on praising for the remainder of my life. It is a passage that speaks of the calming of our fears and the breaking of the bondage in which we poor human beings are held:

¹⁴Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself [Jesus] likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵*and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.* (Hebrews 2:14-15, NRSV)

Here is where my optimism about humanity lies. The Bible seems to believe about us that we would be good if only we were not *afraid* to be so. But the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have altered the universe for Christians, so that we need not be so afraid anymore. We need not live “in slavery by the fear of death.”

So the business person who ponders some shady business practice and thinks to himself, “Life is short. I best grab what I can while I have the chance,” can turn down that business practice if he or she is a Christian. Because life is not *so short* — not if Jesus be risen from the dead.

And the foolish old man who imagines he made himself young again by having an affair can put that temptation aside and think to himself, “I am old, and I have come by it fair and square. But I do not need to try to live forever. I will be young again someday, for Jesus will see to it. Meanwhile, I do not need to wreck the world.”

Nowhere to escape, neither the battle nor the yoke

Meanwhile, I fear that there is nowhere we can go to escape the battle against sin. We could live in a monastery or a convent, we could move to the desert or to the mountaintop, we could even say farewell to the world and live henceforth in our prayer closet. But none of these places are guaranteed to save us from Saint Paul's cry:

²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

But likewise, none of these places and no force on earth can deprive us of Saint Paul's concluding cry of triumph:

²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Finally, let me note that as little as we can escape the battle against sin on this side of eternity, just as little can we escape a kind of slavery. The question is, Who shall we have as Master? Whose yoke shall we bear? Tossed as we are amidst the desire for the good and the desire for sin, whose word shall be decisive in our life?

Well, many a Christian through the ages can give the good testimony that they have tried to be servants of the Lord, and they have found it to be a sweet slavery. If they must bear a yoke, if they must choose one Person to follow, they have found it good to follow the One who beckons to us with the earnest invitation of this morning's Gospel Lesson:

²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
(Matthew 11:28-30, RSV)

I mean Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.