

Romans 7:15-25a Pastor Bill Uetrict 7/5/20 5 Pentecost

A couple of weeks ago on Father's Day I noted how the readings assigned for the weekends when we are celebrating a certain cultural holiday often seem to contradict the spirit of the celebration. On Father's Day we were told that we should not think that Jesus came to bring peace. No, he came to bring a sword; he came to divide. He came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother. Wow, great words for a day when you are celebrating the significance of family!

Well, today the tradition continues. This weekend we commemorate the fourth of July, a day to recall our nation's independence, our history of emphasizing *freedom*. And we get readings that make us wonder how free we really are and that challenge us not to live on the basis of independence.

Once again, the Bible gets in our way. It certainly doesn't stop us from speaking of the love that we have for our land, the geography we call home, and our people, the folks we are privileged to journey with. But the Bible today does force us to go deeper, to question some of the basic assumptions that we have regarding who we are, to focus not simply on being American, but being Christian, followers of Jesus. And sometimes those identities collide.

Paul today unsettles us by telling us what we already really know. What he has to say comes out of real human experience—his and ours. And it's the realization that we are anything but free. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Paul, have you had the camera peaking in on the reality show called "My Life." You know what Paul's talking about, even if you are not so sure you want to admit this truth. We're not as free as we think. Things take over our lives. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil

I do not want is what I do.” But I am free, we protest. Nobody tells me what to do! Maybe not. But something larger than you does. You don’t have as much control over you as you think. Paul responds to that truth with these words: “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Whoa! Sin isn’t simply a long list of naughty things that we do that we shouldn’t; sin is a power—a power that takes hold of our lives. That is such a deeper understanding of sin, an understanding that, frankly, helps us grasp why we have such a hard time getting ourselves together. Changing is not simply a matter of will. To understand this, talk to people who have alcohol and drug addictions. Talk to folks who struggle to lose weight. Talk to folks whose mouths just open, even though they know better. Paul gets it so right: “I find it to be a law, just the way it is, that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. I rejoice in the part of me that really wants to do good, but there is something else at work in my life, something that is at war with my desire to do good.”

So, you think you are free? Think again. In some ways, freedom is an illusion. Now, don’t take this as an excuse for what you do. You know, the devil made me do it; I am not responsible. That is not what I am saying, nor what Paul is getting at. But what he is getting at is that dealing with our sin is much more complex than we ever knew. It’s not just a matter of willing it away, telling ourselves what to do, shaking our fingers at ourselves and other people. We are a lot less free than we think, which is what leads Paul to say, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Now Paul doesn’t conclude simply with a statement of exasperation. Sometimes it’s where we stop. “I guess I’ll never change. I guess it’s all going to remain the same. It’s all hopeless.” This is not Paul’s response. After he confesses that he feels profoundly conflicted,

unable to rescue himself, he responds to his question with this statement of hope: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

In other words, the response to the conundrum Paul finds himself in does not come from within himself. It comes from outside of himself. Getting better isn't simply a matter of willing ourselves to be better. It isn't only an inside job, although trust me, healthy people do the inside work that they need to do. What gets us better, what rescues us from ourselves isn't ourselves.

Again, note, we aren't as free as we so often think ourselves to be. What will get us better is something that comes from outside of ourselves. We who think we will get better simply by our herculean efforts to make us better will be deeply disappointed. Addicted people will tell you that. Often the harder they work the deeper they go in their addiction. The more they shake their own fingers at themselves or the more others do the same, the greater shame they feel. And more shame just means more alcohol or drugs to cover it all up.

What's the key to dealing with addiction, the key to dealing with life itself? The twelve-step programs will tell you: letting go. Letting go of all our efforts at perfectionism. Letting go of all our attempts to negotiate life on the basis of us and our efforts. Letting go of thinking that life is only life when we can control it. Letting go of the burden that life is all about us.

Jesus, in today's gospel reading, invites us to *let go* when he says to the little folks, the non-powerful ones, the new followers, the marginalized ones, the folks who aren't the religious leaders: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your [lives]. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Oh my gosh! And here we've been taught to be independent actors, to make it on our own, to deal with life's challenges by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. And Jesus says, "Let go!" Fall into me. Find rest in me. Ya, following me has big challenges. Following me might mean struggling with my own self-preoccupation. It might entail leaving behind the security of the family. It might mean risk and suffering.

But hear this! Following me will take you to grace and love. To let go and to connect with me will bring you to the place where life is not about proving yourself, earning your way, taking away your own shame and guilt. The religious leaders will take you to crabbiness, defensiveness, and to one burden after another. I invite you to let go and be discovered by a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light. And when you do that, you will have *real* freedom.