

"The Stubbornness of Shortcomings"

Romans 7:15-25a

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Let us pray:

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, prepare our hearts to hear you Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing, we may obey your will through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Last week, we had the pleasure of hearing John Miller preach on the topic of saints. "One of God's greatest gifts to us is the communion of saints. Everyone we have ever known, everyone whose life has touched our lives, everyone who has ever lived, is connected to us, because we are all saints."

And then of course, on Monday I opened to this verse from Romans, which reminds us that we also all struggle with sin. As much as we are saints we are also sinners. From saints to sinners, in a week.

Sin is one of the trickiest terms we have in the lexicon of churchy words. It is uncomfortable – it implies judgment, and while we are ready, with Christ as our sure intercessor, to understand that we stand in front of God's judgment, secure in the forgiveness known in Christ, well, talking about sin with each other is a whole different thing. Talking about sin makes it feel that we are standing in front of each others' judgment, and our defenses go up - we know that everyone sins and falls short, and so who decided that you could point out my sin when you've sure got your own litany of sins yourself. It is also uncomfortable because we know it to be true. We recognize ourselves in Paul's words today, and yet we don't want anyone else to know.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once quipped that "original sin is the only empirically verifiable Christian doctrine. We need only read today's newspaper to know there's something to it." We are all sinners. We are saints too, but we are certainly sinners.

We as Presbyterians do know something about sin – each week we gather and confess our sins in worship here together. In so doing, we acknowledge that all have fallen short, that all need to come before God in forgiveness, prince and pauper alike – and we are reminded of the forgiveness and grace of Christ.

We are also reminded that sin goes beyond just following our worldly law. It is easy to feel righteous, to feel beyond sin when we do not embezzle or steal or assault. We can pat ourselves on the back for not shoplifting. And yet in our prayers of confession, we also confess things like falling short, like leaving things undone, like ignoring our neighbor in need. Nothing that would put us in jail, but all things that convict us compared the example of Christ's life here on earth.

We are also reminded that sin can be collective, that sin can come from the systems we belong to, that it comes into our lives in conscious decisions and unconscious patterns alike.

Sin, shortcomings, those places where we fail to follow God in full obedience, we see all of them in today's text, where Paul is the grappling with the stubbornness and persistence of sin.

Paul's voice here is so recognizable. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." A way to think about sin is with addiction. Paul's words in the letter to the Romans would not be out of place here on Monday evenings when we host Alcoholics Anonymous. "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." Paul's honest confession here is exactly the kind of humble admission that makes AA work - the recognition of powerlessness in the face of addiction, the surrender to a higher power. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Even those of us who do not struggle with alcohol addiction can hear our own voices in what Paul writes here. There are so many other addictions – drugs, gambling, anything that gives that buzz of dopamine, that hit of something new and novel, that pulls us into cycles of repetition, of chasing that same little high.

Our modern society has normalized one such addiction – to information, mediated through social media, and most insidiously, through our cell phones.

Studies are showing that the brain kicks out dopamine with that new and novel reward – that text message buzz, that red indicator showing a new Facebook message, that number showing a new email – the same dopamine that comes with reward and dependence cycles for addicts of all kinds.

It is an addiction that I find myself grappling with. The cycle for me is among various news and social media sites. I will find myself reading an article, clicking a link, reading an article, clicking a link, and each time the new page comes up, there is the promise of new information, and each time I'm done scrolling through whatever it is, there is that slight emptiness, the emptiness I'd imagine at the end of a bottle for an alcoholic. That one didn't do it. Onto the next, forever in search of meaning deeper than the little high of a notification, but searching where only that can be found. I have gotten bored while looking at my phone and so I start looking for my phone to distract me from that boredom. The very phone that's still in my hand, that trapped me in the boredom in the first place.

And here in Paul's words today, we recognize addiction: I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

And yet the most insidious thing about sin in these circumstances is that sin, our own shortcomings, our human failings, sin twists good things to empty ends. The same cell phone that traps me is also an avenue for incredible knowledge, connection, and easing of daily life. The same alcohol that traps some in deep addiction is enjoyed with dinner by people the world over. The same ingredients in our most powerful painkillers become the spurs of addiction and the opioid epidemic. The human potential for incredible goodness is the same potential that pushes us into selfish, sinful decisions. And what has Paul so vexed here is that for him, even following the law became the trap and the addiction. Sin takes God's good gifts and turns them against ourselves.

I mentioned Reinhold Niebuhr a moment ago – one of my favorite theologians, and one who has been on the national stage again recently. A PBS documentary aired this spring: An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr story. He has been cited by folks on the right and left, a favorite of Jimmy Carter, Cornel West, Barack Obama, John McCain, David Brooks, and James Comey. Niebuhr was a theologian first, but his insights have shaped political philosophy and social ethics as well.

The radio program On Being described Niebuhr: "He was born in 1892, the German-American son of a Protestant minister. As a young man, he pastored a church in Henry Ford's Detroit, where he became a force for labor rights and race relations. On the eve of the Great Depression in 1928, he accepted an invitation to teach social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. There, he stayed for three decades. Niebuhr wrote books with grand, evocative titles: *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *The Irony of American History*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*." That book begins, "Man has always been his own most vexing problem." Human nature, Niebuhr explained, would always complicate even our highest ideals and our greatest accomplishments."

((For Niebuhr, the irony and tragedy of sin is that our virtues and our vices are tied up in each other. In *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, he holds out hope that an individual can behave altruistically, with deep concern for the other. However, when that individual is bound up with a group - a tribe, a party, a people, a nation - the broader majority is incapable of acting in anything other than their collective self-interest.

Such responses become part of the ways that we perpetuate cycles of sin and separation in the world. To return to Paul: "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but 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." How often we feel at a loss when our society seems to be going so far afield from what any of us desires. In the name of our neighbors, we end up in systems that support selfishness, even when we would strive after compassion.)))

It is this irony, that our virtue and vice are wrapped up in one another, that makes it impossible for us to address our own sin, to overcome our own shortcomings. Ted Smith, a bishop in the Methodist Church, points out the distinction here: "If the problem were just weakness of human will, the reconciliation would require nothing more than a little extra willpower. Jesus would be something like a really good life coach, someone who could help us keep our resolutions."

How often is this our response to sin? If we could only bridge the gap between where we are and what we can envision. If only we could get rid of that one bad habit, if only we could will ourselves to that perfection.

The architect Le Corbusier was a Swiss modernist architect. He said of houses that they were machines for living, and with other modernist architects, believed that our spaces had the ability to change our lives, that by perfecting the machine, we could aspire to perfecting our lives. One of his most famous houses was a beautiful modernist white house, horizontal and vertical and clean-lined. The Villa Savoye, in the French countryside. The details were designed so that everything fit together. Even the carport, underneath the house, was a curving drive, and the curve was exactly that of the turning radius of a 1927 Citroen. Houses and lives stitched together with all the willpower, all the intention, all the care so as to achieve perfection.

But what happens when you get a 1930 Citroen?

The truth is that our world is imperfect. Our ability to achieve perfection will always remain out of reach.

And the gap between our own willpower and the full obedience of God is impossible to bridge, for it is the gap between the human and the divine. And the gap between our capacity and the ability to change society is nearly as great. And still the irony - that we cannot stop from humbly walking forward, doing all the good we can.

We will persist in sinning. The world will persist in sinning. And all we can do is turn again, again, again to following Christ in our lives. The yoke is easy and the burden is light – we turn to following Christ, to pursuing compassion in our personal lives, to pursuing justice in our public life together. Humbly recognizing that our actions will never achieve perfection, that we will always fall short, and yet we will always be forgiven.

To return to Niebuhr: “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, could be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our own standpoint; therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

And one final piece, connecting together addiction and reliance and Reinhold Niebuhr, is known as the serenity prayer. As we grapple with persisting in sin, with the reality and stubbornness of sin, and yet still working for change and good in the world, slowly, step by step, we can pray with Niebuhr by saying: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

This is the Gospel that Paul ultimately proclaims: Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Thanks be to God indeed. Alleluia, Amen.