

July 9 Sermon – Romans 7: 15-25(a), Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30: “The War Within”

This weekend marks my first anniversary in this pulpit. One of the things you learn when you preach every week and make your way through the lectionary is that there are some themes that God, through the medium of the writers in the early church, repeated time after time. God obviously wanted to emphasize certain ideas in such a way that we would be sure to understand. We’re going to be talking about one of those themes today.

Paul’s letter to the Romans comes late in his ministry. By the time he wrote that letter, he had been traveling around the Mediterranean basin for about twenty years. And at the end of that journey, he had learned some things, some important things, and he was really anxious to pass them on to the Christians who came after him.

One of the most important things that Paul had learned was the meaning of sin. Often, in the modern world, we think of sin as something that happens when we break a rule. Paul, however, looked at sin and understood it very differently. For Paul, sin was what happened when our relationship with God became distorted. When we started to focus on ourselves, rather than on worship and obedience to God, then we would be in a state of sin.

The passage from Romans this morning talks about the persistence of sin – how easy it is for us to give in to our own selfish urges and move away from God. Sin is powerful, and it’s always there, trying to tempt us and lead us astray from the healthy relationship that God wants with us.

How did we get here? What gives sin such power over us?

Every now and then, it pays for us to stretch our imaginations a bit. So I’m going to ask us all to imagine what it might be like if we were living about 300,000 years ago, when our species, *homo sapiens*, split off from the other branches of the human family tree and became the one branch that would continue to thrive as history moved forward.

If we were back there in that long-ago day, at the dawn of human beings as we know them today, we would find ourselves in a very challenging environment. People had started to learn how to use and make tools, but it was still a very low-tech life. And it was a life that seemed to be threatened on all sides.

There are wild animals that want to kill us. And we can’t really avoid them altogether, since we haven’t learned to farm yet, so hunting animals is the primary source of our food. Every time we go in search of our dinner, there are also larger beasts out there who are also searching for their dinner, and we are very much on their menu. When we come into contact with predators, we’re in grave danger. If

any of you have ever been in a situation where it's kill or be killed, you know just how scary that is.

And, although we might have formed a few very tentative alliances with other people, for the most part, humans are competing with one another for resources that are pretty scarce. Whether it's food or water, access to a cave that will give us shelter, or an animal whose pelt will keep us warm enough to survive the winter, we are usually coming up against other humans who need the same things in order to insure their survival.

So what are we learning as we make our way through this often hostile world? We're learning to be afraid – afraid that we might not be able to get the things we need just to make it through to the next day, or the next week. We're not thinking much beyond that, because fear is driving us in a desperate search for something that might feel like security, at least on a short-term basis. The world is teaching you to fear, and as soon as you're afraid, as surely as the night follows the day, you're going to develop some very selfish instincts.

And you'll be telling yourself: I'd better be sharp, I'd better hone my skills as a hunter, I'd better watch out for all the people who want to prevent me from getting what I need, or else I'll die. It's all up to me, and what I can do to make sure I have enough of the most essential things.

So fear, my friends, leads us to selfishness, and away from holiness.

Selfishness is more than a habit – it’s an instinct that is so deeply embedded within us that we cannot root it out by ourselves. This is what Paul is writing about in this passage from Romans. When he speaks of sin, and of evil, he’s writing about all the instincts that lead us away from godliness. He admits that, on our own, we are powerless to fight these instincts. They’re locked inside us, and we can’t cut them out.

It seems like a pretty bleak picture, doesn’t it? Listen to what Paul writes: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” It would be a hopeless picture that Paul paints – except for one thing: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

God has given us a way out of the toxic cocoon of the self. God has given us the supreme gift, God’s own Son, who shows us the power not of selfishness, but of sacrifice for others. God gives us a way out of the fear that imprisons us. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ indeed!

But in order to really take full advantage of God’s gift, there’s something we have to unlearn. We have to unlearn the idea that self-reliance is the only way for us to survive. Fear always makes us fall back on ourselves. Fear always says to us: “it’s up to you whether you live or die.” Fear always makes us think we have

to control everything around us. We have to unlearn that in order to be closer to God -- and unlearning things is typically a lot harder than learning them to begin with.

We've talked a lot during the last few months about how our desire to control our lives, and the lives of others, is so destructive. And it's destructive because it puts the emphasis on ourselves, rather than on God.

And here's an irony: the harder we try to become righteous, the more trouble we're in. If we say: "I'm going to strive to be closer to what God wants me to be," then we're still assuming that our efforts are what is going to make the difference. It's still about us, and what we do, what we can control. We are, in essence, saying: "I can win my own salvation by being better, by trying harder, by exerting my own will." And that's just not the way it works.

I don't know if you remember from when you were kids a toy called Chinese handcuffs. It was a small cylinder made of bamboo, and if you put your index fingers inside of it, and then someone told you to free yourself, your instinct would be to pull your fingers out -- but the thing was constructed in such a way so that pulling your fingers outward just tightened it, and you'd end up trapped until someone told you that the secret was to relax and push your fingers inward to

loosen it up so you could free yourself. But for as long as you kept pulling outwards, you just made things worse.

One commentator, a fellow named Lance Pape, put it this way. He wrote: “Knowledge of God, it turns out, cannot be achieved. God is not just another thing in the world that we can reach out and take hold of by our own power. The more we grasp after knowledge of God by our own wits, the less we attain.” Mr. Pape was on to something. What God wants to give us doesn’t come through our efforts, but through God’s grace. We can’t earn it, or deserve it, or bargain for it.

What we have to do is to surrender ourselves to God. And surrender is hard, isn’t it? It’s tough to say: “I can’t do this, and I’m going to lose if I try to do it on my own.”

Think back for a minute to that old hymn that tells us “What a friend we have in Jesus.” Who are our friends – our real friends? They’re the people we trust. They’re the people we know will be there when we discover we can’t do things by ourselves. So when we surrender to God, we need someone with us, someone we trust, someone who won’t abandon us and serve their own needs, someone who will stick by us and insure that our surrender isn’t a vain act of defeat, but instead leads us to the right relationship with God. And that is why we

*do* have a friend in Jesus, who is ready to stand by us when we finally come to understand that surrender doesn't mean defeat, but triumph.

Our passage from Matthew proves this to be true. Listen to the words of Jesus: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." "***Anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him***" – this is all about sharing, isn't it? It's not about Jesus hoarding resources for His own benefit; it's about Him inviting others to know what He knows. And we, my friends, all of us in this sanctuary today -- we have been chosen by God to know these things through Christ. If that doesn't make you feel blessed, then I hardly know what could.

And of course it follows that once we learn this all-important lesson, once we have had Jesus see us through this surrender to God, it's up to us to share that knowledge with others, just as Jesus has shared it with us. Jesus may be our personal savior, but He does not belong exclusively to us. Jesus belongs to everyone, and we have to share Him with others.

Friends, just as God is endlessly generous to us, just as God showers us with God's grace, my prayer this morning is that we echo that generosity in our lives, freely sharing what we have been given, giving all the glory to God and pointing

toward God so that other people may hear the good news and give themselves over to the holy surrender that will free them from the trap of the self.

May Almighty God make it so. Amen.