

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.5.20

Romans 7:15-25a

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,²³ 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.²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,¹⁷ "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn."¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon";¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."...²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.²⁷ 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.²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (485)

When Jesse left Austen Riggs, he'd been there for seven years, four years a fellow in their training program and three years on staff. That's seven years that the hospital had become used to having him around, which is to get used to his laugh.

His laugh: I don't know if you've noticed it. It's appealing, his the very reason laughter is said to come in peals. Loud enough to be heard—and even there, throughout the halls, though I bet they were littered with those white noise machines—there's a heady depth to it. It just sounds like joy.

When he left the hospital, left to open a private practice, people said they'd miss his laughter. At graduation that year, when people made speeches about the graduates of the

fellowship and others who'd be leaving, the medical director claimed he'd miss Jesse's laughter, which I don't think was a matter of being damned by faint praise. It's not like he couldn't find anything else to miss about Jesse. It's just that this was the quality he most brought to the work, and it was rare, at least there, where the patients are challenging and very deeply suffering, and where clinicians are all bent on analytical thinking.

Laughter doesn't always survive its own analysis, and there are some times, in some contexts, when being of good cheer seems wrongheaded—like Jesus here enjoying himself just a little too much.

He knew what he was up against—or at least for the most part. This is why he'd gathered disciples, commissioned them as apostles and sent them out to do the work of the gospel in his name. This, because there was so very much work to do. People were suffering—sickness, possession by destructive spirits, death. The harvest of work was indeed plentiful, but the laborers were few.

Meanwhile, John was suffering maybe more than most, he who spurred the strange admonishing we just heard, Jesus saying to the crowd, “To what shall I compare this generation...?”

It's been many weeks since we've heard from John, or even about John. This week, too, we don't technically hear from him or about him. But we should always bear him in mind when we consider the gospel narrative, because he's always there, woven into the story. As the herald of the Messiah, he is always going before. And, as Jesus' cousin just six months older, not to mention the first to have recognized Jesus as the Messiah, he was likely always on Jesus' mind.

Do you remember? When John had gone out to the river Jordan to baptize people with water for repentance, he did so foretelling of the one to come who'd baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This one, John promised, would be as a reaper with a winnowing fork, and he would gather all in the world that is as wheat into his granary, but would burn all in the world that is as chaff, burn it with unquenchable fire.

And when Jesus did indeed come out like the rest, to the river Jordan to be baptized by John with water for repentance, John knew this was backward, *recognized* that this was backward—that here was the one greater than he, and so *he* should submit to baptism by Jesus, not the other way around.

After all, of what had Jesus to repent? This change of mind that is repentance, this expansion of mind that is *metanoia*: why would Jesus need such a baptism, he who already possessed and was possessed of the mind of God, which is what repentance is as to be?

Such a transformation of the mind that it approaches the mind of God, divination, theosis, the becoming as of God: why would Jesus need to embark on this project, he who is the fulfillment of this project?

Yet he did. “Let it be so for now,” he told John, and then submerged himself into the water.

From there, these two cousins went about their work, separately, but in the same way that a braid is three separate strands: together they make the braid.

John would be severe, as prophets often are, dressing in clothing of camel’s hair, eating locusts and wild honey. Jesus would be easier, befriending tax collectors (like the disciple Matthew, after whom our gospel writer, Matthew, named and considered himself). He’d be thought a glutton, a drunkard, because he didn’t refrain from the sorts of things you’d think a religious person would refrain from.

What’s more, he wouldn’t be as a reaper with a winnowing fork. He wouldn’t apparently gather all in the world that is as wheat into his granary while burning all in the world that is as chaff with unquenchable fire.

In sum, there was little of John’s expectation fulfilled in Jesus, which had begun quite pressingly to puzzle John, even trouble John.

For this, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?”

This happened just prior to the pericope we just heard. John’s disciples had just arrived to ask of Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” which had Jesus assure them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”

But this whole thing seems to have provoked the crowd gathered around Jesus, for now he had something to say to them: “To what will I compare this generation?” It’s as if the crowd had thrilled at witnessing this little feud between John and Jesus as to whose was the right way to be

“religious” in the world, as to what righteousness looks like—whether hair shirts or overflowing cups, whether a diet of foraged locusts or bummed lamb. And they’d chosen their champion, Jesus the bum, the itinerant Christ.

So, John had taken offence at Jesus? They then would sneer at John.

The thing is, John’s expectations of the Messiah weren’t just notional, weren’t just aesthetic. John wasn’t just hoping for someone who would perform or virtue-signal messiah-hood. He was actually needful of the sort of Messiah he’d long expected. He actually needed Jesus to *do* something—to get rid of the unrighteous, to make topple the imperial occupation, to bring about the righteous reign of God.

Because things had taken a tragic turn for John—and now he was in prison, and soon he’d be executed. Herod would have him beheaded at the request of his wife Herodias, which was at the request of Herodias’ daughter Salome, all at a dinner party where Salome had danced for the gathered guests, which had pleased them, which in turn pleased Herod, which had him promise to fulfill any wish Salome might ask.

Her wish was for John’s head on a platter.

This she asked because this is what Herodias (her mother) wanted, and this Herodias wanted because John had taken up the embarrassing habit of condemning her marriage to Herod. It was unlawful, according to this scolding prophet, because she had prior been married to Herod’s brother, but whom Herod had killed so he could have her. (Think: *Hamlet*.)

And who knows if this had been according to her will, or had been against her will? Who knows, because when the king decides he wants you as his wife, and when you know he’s someone who gets what he wants no matter how many people have to die to make it so, which means once you’re married to him you’ll get what you want no matter what, which is a difficult thing to turn away from even as you might know it’s not the most gratifying way to live, especially if the king you end up married to because he had killed your first husband, his brother, is someone as stupid and disgusting as Herod seems to have been, it’s hard to know what is in accordance with your will and what it against your will.

To be a powerful, miserable, cruel queen, or to be a content secondary member of the court?

It’s a hard decision.

Not that it mattered much what she'd wanted. What's done was done: her first husband was killed, she to be married off to his murderer, the king, her husband's brother, her daughter's uncle and step-father, who would leer at her daughter and have his dinner guests do the same, which might put her in mind of the question, when would Herod have Herodias killed so he could marry her daughter?

Again, think: Hamlet and Gertrude and Claudius, but now be sure to mix in a little Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell and (who knows, maybe) Prince Andrew and Donald Trump in order to get right level of disgust.

And John? He was in prison because he was a killjoy, but also something of a pet, of whom it's said that Herod liked to listen to him, and who would eventually be beheaded because, in having it so done, Herodias could punish both the prophet and the king who just sort of liked him and whom she just sort of hated—both of them, in fact, John and Herod.

Two birds. One stone.

These were horrible people—and John said as much, and it would be his undoing, unless Jesus was the one whom the likes of John expected him to be.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

He was waiting in prison

Tired?

Terrified?

Desperately in need of a messiah who wouldn't stand for any of this, who would finally just get that unquenchable fire kindled, roaring.

“Are you the one?”

I sometimes wonder whether Jesus knew the situation John was in when John asked this question. I sometimes wonder whether Jesus knew the desperate hope behind the question when he sent John's disciples back to John with this answer, of which we don't know whether John even received. (His death would be that soon.) Yes, the blind receive their sight. Yes, the lame walk. Yes, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf are made to hear and the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. But, no, there is no violent toppling of the unjust. (These will, though, fall on their own swords.) No, there is no punishing of the wicked. (For these, though, their wickedness will become its own punishment.) There is no unquenchable fire. Herod will

continue to reign, stupidly, all cowardice and capriciousness, and his court will be filled with lechers and freeloaders, and his dungeons will be filled with people of courage and conscience and good faith. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at this patience, this toleration, this “let it be so for now.” Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at this making present and manifest the reign of God which will, slowly, slowly, though most surely, root out the kingdoms of this world for their incapacity to withstand love and truth and grace and good will.

Yes, and no, and yes.

I sometimes wonder whether, if Jesus *had* known the circumstances John was in when he asked the question, he’d have at least given a fuller answer than the one he gave. It was a little curt.

But then I realize that to wonder this is to express the same disappointment, if not sense of offence, that John was expressing—that Jesus doesn’t seem to be registering the enormity of the problem, that Jesus doesn’t seem nearly dour enough at the state of the world in which he finds himself nor the depth of the trouble we all seem to be in.

I mean, if he really means to be about saving the world, then he’d better get to work—and he’d better make it look more like work.

Religion is supposed to be tricky. Righteousness is supposed to be laborious. The presence of God is supposed to make you stand up straight and quiet your silly mouth. This is *work*.

Or is it?

Paul had been very comfortable with the work of righteousness. As a Pharisee, he was well versed in everything that religious righteousness was to entail, and well-practiced in performing it. And it had served good purpose. Obeying the law is a good thing to do; when the law approaches what is good, then obeying it is good. But doing so doesn’t make you good, not in the absolute sense of the word.

What’s more, doing so won’t actually save the world. It might make surviving the world more possible, more pleasant. It might even make the world more just. It might make living together with others more possible, more pleasant. It might even make our social, political lives together more just. But it won’t get to the root of the problem. The law, even a most just law, even a most righteous law, won’t get to the root of our problem—each and all, this problem at play intrapersonally, interpersonally, politically, civilizationally.

This, our problem, is something deeper than what can be managed by law or legislated under control. This, our problem, is something more mysterious and powerful than anything that can be commanded away. “Thou shalt nots...” will only get us so far.

So, how are we to be saved from this body of death, this world of corruption?

Sin.

This is one of the most rejected concepts of Christian tradition. We hear it as an insult, or we hear it as a judgment, or we hear it as the beginning of some practice of shaming. It’s as if we hear it to indicate some failing on our part.

But I think what it indicates is the thing which makes success impossible. I think it means to name the quality of our lived experience that makes any attempts at righteousness doomed from the start. We’re not *not good* because we’re failing to be good, but because there’s something intrinsic about life in the world that prohibits the ultimate triumph of us as good.

See, it’s not that you’re not trying hard enough, it’s that trying hard isn’t enough, will never be enough, so maybe you can just relax a little?

Maybe you can enjoy yourself a little more?

Don’t get me wrong: it’s appreciated. That you’re trying to do the right thing, that we’re all practicing our faith so to become more fully of God: this is all to be appreciated, so thank you.

Thank us.

But *this* will not be the thing that wins the day.

Faith practice is asymptotic: even if it approaches the line of perfection, it never perfectly joins perfection—not on this side of the horizon, not in this world of sin.

That takes grace.

Salvation takes grace, the mysterious action of God.

So, this holiday weekend, during this lovely summer season, maybe just relax a little, enjoy yourself a bit more. There is *so much* that’s wrong with the world. I know it, and you know it, and I know that you know it, so let’s not list it all here. Let’s instead take a moment, a day even, to rejoice and give thanks that many of the problems we do face in the world are best addressed with love, with joy. Many of the problems we face together are well addressed with friendship and fondness and affection and understanding and compassion and kindness—these things that have real and intrinsic appeal.

We laugh in the hallways of psychiatric, spiritual, political suffering—such laughter not being a callous dismissal of it all, or even a hopeful resistance to it all, but a revealing of God’s surprising presence amidst it all, doing its slow work of saving and redeeming it all.

Join in the happy work, if you will. Rest from the manifold work when you need. Rest assured that God doesn’t rest, not until this work is complete and the world is consumed into the thoroughgoing reign of God. It’s happening, so relax and rejoice.

Thanks be to God.