

**The Gift of Freedom**  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
July 3, 2011

**Romans 7:15-25a (24-25)**

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup>For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 (28-30)**

<sup>16</sup> ‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

<sup>17</sup> “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; <sup>19</sup>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.’

<sup>25</sup> 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; <sup>26</sup>yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup>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.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

These final words in today’s reading from Matthew are so familiar: “Come to me, all you that are weary and 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 souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” We think of those we love who have left this world, especially those who knew much suffering and pain when we hear those words. And it is right that we remember these words on the occasion of death. Yet these words are not only for the dead and dying but for the living, for those in the thick of the ordinary day-to-day life.

Last week, citing the opening of our reading from the letter to the Romans, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate,” I mentioned that even Paul,

pillar of our faith, had times when he pulled away from God. We need look no further than Paul's behavior as Saul, in hot pursuit of all who claimed to follow Christ. Paul's words, however, speak to the whole of humankind. Who has not wanted to do the right thing, in theory, but found the wrong too appealing?

Paul's words continue: "Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." The innate desire to pull away from God, to be independent of God, is within each of us; it is original sin. This sin works in us in ways that deceive us. In our search for independence, we take the foundation God has provided us, the foundation we have learned from Christ, and say, "Thanks, we've got it from here." We think, because we've had years of Sunday School lessons and because we've sat through countless sermons on hard pews and because we've read the Bible, at least some of it, that we get the gist of things: be good to others, don't kill anyone, don't take things that don't belong to you, love God.

The trouble is, as theologian Harold Masback says, we "have cobbled together a law of [our] own lives from [our] understanding of Christian virtues, family values, or any number of definitions of the good person" and that we "believe that resolving conflict between [our] good intentions and [our] actual deeds is a matter of trying harder."<sup>1</sup> Not just when we're in need, when we're troubled or worried or sad, but *every day* we need God. We cannot get ourselves out of this original sin, we cannot free ourselves. Masback describes a fitting analogy. He says, "In the film, *A Beautiful Mind*, the brilliant but psychotic mathematician John Nash assures his psychiatrist that he will deploy his analytic skills to cure his own illness. 'You can't reason your way out of this,' his doctor replies, 'because your mind is where the problem is in the first place!'"<sup>2</sup> It is beyond us to fix what, from within us, does not want to be fixed. This is the reason Paul says, "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

You may be thinking, "But I don't do naughty things every day. You mustn't be talking about me." Sorry, but we're all included here. You see, as I've said, sin is that state of being apart from God. In our efforts to make sense of what the Bible says, just as those in generations before us, just as with the Pharisees of Jesus' time, we don't always get it right. We take the idea and we run with it, forgetting to check back every so often to see if we are still understanding the true meaning. It is times like these when we are following the letter of the law, instead of the spirit. The Pharisees were upset because Jesus was breaking the letter of the law by healing on the Sabbath and picking grain on the Sabbath - the spirit of the law, that we should obey the Sabbath, desires us to be intentional about becoming whole

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 211.

again. This Independence Day weekend we remember that King George III manipulated the law to keep the colonies under his control. Paul, as Saul, was upset that followers of Christ were breaking the letter of the law by affirming Christ was the Messiah when he did not fit the image the sages had drawn or do the things they thought he should do because of their years of interpreting the scriptures - the spirit of the law said a savior would come and free the peoples.

Those who use the law, and the Bible, to justify hateful and violent ways are far from the spirit of the law - we can clearly understand that. Those who make exceptions in the law, and the Bible, to fit their own circumstances, those, too, are not in keeping with the spirit of the law, either. Perhaps you have passed a homeless person with only a \$20 in your wallet - "it's too bad I don't have a smaller bill," you think as you walk on by. Perhaps you've held a grudge - "they hurt / offended / betrayed me too much to let it go." Perhaps you just really enjoy a good piece of gossip - you think, "if I know this about that person, then I'll know what not to say to keep from upsetting them" or "if I don't tell anyone else, then it's not gossip." I may not have named your own exception but I suspect you, like me, have got one (or two or more). The fact is, we all tend to think we know better - it's not just an affliction of the teen years - remember when?

And this is where our reading from Matthew comes in this morning. That same twisting of the law was happening in Jesus' time. John the Baptist came calling people to repentance but his call was too difficult to follow so the leaders, and others, wrote him off as strange, too stringent. Jesus came eating and drinking, those things that John eschewed to a minimalistic level, but Jesus did so with unsavory people so the leaders wrote him off. The rules kept changing. First they wanted someone who danced. When that person came along, they wanted someone who mourned. Jesus came to set them, and us, free from all the made-up rules and restrictions. If you are tired of these things that do not matter, come to me.

"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 souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Theologian and professor of homiletics, Alyce McKenzie sheds much light on this passage. She says, "The yoke of the law' is a common phrase in rabbinic writings. Jesus was not so much criticizing the law itself, but the scribes who load people down with burdens hard to bear. 'You who labor and are carrying heavy burdens' refers to those who have lost the spirit of the law, [which is] constant gratitude to and mindfulness of God, in the letter [of the law] - believing that adherence to a multitude of precepts and commandments constitutes

righteousness.”<sup>3</sup> If you have gotten lost in what you think is right when you were really aiming for what is right, follow Jesus.

Jesus never makes a promise to relieve us of our burdens - burdens are part of life, just as much as blessings are. If we are tied, if we are yoked to a law that has lost sight of God, has lost sight of those two commandments to love God and love your neighbor, if we are weighed down by the unnecessary then we need to be freed. We cannot do this ourselves - remember sin is big on self-preservation - we need to be freed. Through Jesus we can find rest for our souls; we, like Paul, can say, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

In my studies this week, I found many who said what I wanted to say and did it particularly well so I share with you the words of yet another theologian, Scott Hoezee, the Director for the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary. He says about the rest Jesus offered (and offers), “it was to know a kind of peace that passes all understanding... It was to experience a kind of ‘rest’ that accords with the best of what Sabbath has always been about in Scripture: a rest from the incessant demands of ego, a rest from the wearisome treadmill of sinful competition and one-upsmanship, a rest from all that has gone wrong in this world and so a way to rest *into* our true identity as God’s imagebearers, now re-created and restored back into that image through Jesus Christ, the express image of God par excellence.”<sup>4</sup>

Oh, to be freed in such a way! To be freed to live a life that *really* matters, not as it could be recorded somewhere or as it might be reflected in our bank accounts, but a life with God at the center, and at the edges and everywhere in between. It’s not easy to give up the burdens that weary us, those habits of sin. But if you did, if you could let go of the matters best left in God’s hands, if you could let go of the superficial worries, what would you do then? What would you be freed from? What would you be freed to? What would you be freed for? I’ll give you a moment to really think about it. If you could give up your burdens, what would you be freed to do?

Let us pray: Lord, open our hearts that we might accept you with your gift of freedom for us all. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Lay-Your-Burden-Down-Alyce-McKenzie-06-27-2011.html>, July 1, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>, July 1, 2011.