

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“The Struggle Within”

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Romans 7: 14-25

14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. 15 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.

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal about former President Calvin Coolidge. I seem to recall that President Coolidge was a Congregationalist by faith, just like us. It seems that Silent Cal, famous for brevity of language, attended worship at his home church on Sunday. When he returned home his wife quizzed him about the sermon. “What did the preacher talk about today?” she asked. “Sin,” said the rather reserved president. Wanting to know more, his wife continued the line of questioning. “What did the minister say about sin?” With only a moment of thought Cal answered back, “He said that he was against it.”

Sin. I am certain that you did not get out of bed early on a Fourth of July weekend, hoping to hear a discussion on that topic. Sin. That nasty, little three letter word is hard for most of us to hear, much less seriously consider for 10-15 minutes on a hot July morning. Sin was perhaps a topic for a preacher from another time, maybe one hundred years or so ago, when people came to church openly expecting to confront their guilt and God’s judgment. Fire and brimstone sermons were the norm rather than the exception. Today’s preachers and today’s churches are usually different. I don’t know as if I have ever given a fire and brimstone sermon.

The mention of the word “sin” makes many uncomfortable. I had a woman in a previous church who asked me not to use the word in my sermons. I got real good at finding synonyms like “shortcomings” and “failures,” but they just didn’t seem to carry

the same authority as “sin.” When I included a prayer of confession as part of the liturgy for the sacrament of The Lord’s Supper, this past parishioner told me that such prayers take away from “the positive experience of worship.” I finally gave up and just started using the word “sin” freely.

In her book, *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of her experience at Yale Divinity School in the later 1970’s. She was angry because the books that she needed to use for her reading and research never seemed to be on the shelves of the library. For many, there was no record of the book being checked out. After a few frustrating visits, Taylor went to the librarian to ask what was happening. The librarian said that the Divinity School had the highest theft rate of any graduate school at Yale University. “How embarrassing,” Taylor responded. “Why do you suppose that is?” The librarian had a quick answer, “Grace,” he said. “You guys figure that all has already been forgiven ahead of time. So you go ahead and take what you want right now.”

While missing library books may rank low on the scale of forgiveable and unforgiveable offenses, the librarian’s response spoke to a real truth. Perhaps we are not honest about how much we have fallen short in the eyes of God. Oh, it is easy to point out the sins that surround us in the world. Murder, abuse, terror, adultery and corporate scandal are at the top of the list. Further on down we might find things that really point their finger at us- road rage, overeating, telling little white lies. But these sins are either so overwhelming or so ordinary that they just don’t seem to move us toward confession and repentance. It is good for us to reflect more seriously about sin and how it relates to our own lives instead of creating ways that soften sin’s impact.

The apostle Paul appears to be in some conflict about his own sin in the seventh chapter of his letter to the church at Rome. He writes an honest confession to those early fellow Christians there. He is almost uncomfortably honest. Sin lives within him. There is a constant struggle raging between the good and the evil. Paul writes, “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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells within me.”

In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard tells the story of an Eskimo hunter who went to visit the local missionary who had been preaching in his village. “I want to ask you something,” the hunter said. “What’s that?” replied the missionary. “If I did not know about God and sin,” the hunter said, “would I go to hell?” “No,” the missionary said, “not if you did not know.” “Then why,” asked the hunter, “did you tell me?”

It is the knowledge of our sin that moves us. Paul is almost engaged in some sort of Shakespearian dialogue with himself, isn’t he? Some commentators see this almost as an internal civil war; the struggle between good and evil, right and wrong, thoughts and actions. When I read this over again I almost begin to believe Paul was blaming his sin upon some sort of evil twin that resided inside of him. There is a difference between him and that no-good lousy sin that lives within him. But then I have probably watched too many bad television movies. I also thought of comedian Flip Wilson’s character Geraldine who explained the bad things she had done by saying, “The devil made me do it!”

We want to eat better. Still we can't resist the desserts and potato chips that taste so good. We want to exercise. But it is difficult find time to work out when there are so many other demands. We want to live a simpler life. Yet our wishes and desires require our obligation to work and salary. We want to be more spiritual. Yet there are always more immediate things to focus on than prayer or meditation or Scripture.

Paul's dilemma is the human dilemma. Clearly, there seems to be some kind of gap between our best intentions and the reality of the way in which we live. Perhaps we prefer to take the cause of that gap outside the realms of faith and applied the more generous measuring scales of culture. We sometimes label sin as a sickness. We excuse our behavior based on the hand we were dealt. We are quick to blame our brain, our chemistry, or our environment. We need only medicine to fix us.

On the other hand we are sometimes caught up in moral legal view. Sin is akin to breaking the law and we are guilty. If we are caught doing something wrong we have to face the consequences. Justice is what is needed to make things right and we can only do that through appropriate punishment.

Religious people of different traditions have developed ways of freeing ourselves from this civil war caused by sin. Some choose works-actions that right the wrongs we have done and deliver us to a place where we are restored. Some choose asceticism, a retreat from the world that causes the temptation to sin. It is only through living a more pure life that we can overcome the conflict within our soul. Both ways imply that there is something we can do, if only we can find it, to make ourselves good and clean and spotless.

Paul seems to be saying that he always has good intentions. He experiences the love of God in his heart and he feels freed by the Holy Spirit to live a new life in Christ. Still, he manages to do things that he knows are wrong. If he has to rely upon his own wisdom and his own goodness to conquer his bad behavior, he will forever wallow in endless guilt. If he has to rely upon his good works, his own action to make things right, he will forever be wrong. Yet Paul does not seem to see his sin as a malady of fate or as a list of bad or unhealthy behaviors to be avoided. He does not ask for medicine to make him well. He does not seek a fair and just punishment to even the scales of justice. Paul recognizes that God has already acted to set things right, and it is in his honest confession, his need for forgiveness, and his acknowledgement of Jesus as the source of that forgiveness that he finds the power to enable him to move on in his daily life.

Emmet Fox tells the story of a prisoner incarcerated in a dungeon-like cell for twenty years. He was kept alone except for the once-a-day entrance of the jailer who delivered bread and water. Finally, the poor prisoner could stand it no longer. He resolved to attack the jailer on his next visit, with the expectation that he would either escape or that the jailer would kill him and end his misery. He spent weeks formulating the plans and rehearsing its execution. In preparation he examined the door of his cell carefully, and discovered that it was unlocked. He opened it, walked down the corridor, past several guards who ignored him, and made his way home where he lived happily ever after.

The apostle Paul felt the captivity of the soul we all feel, the struggle of our sin against our best intentions: what keeps us from doing what we know is right and godly. While we may try to do whatever we can to set ourselves free, while we may struggle

with the coddling of our ego and the working out of our own salvation, Paul understood what had already set him free- God's gracious presence in his life. We are already rescued. We walk free in lives of service and discipleship.