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Tabor Presbyterian Church
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Romans 7:15-25a
Oh, No, a Sermon on Sin, Again!?
Zoom Worship

Paul does some confessing: *Nothing good dwells within me... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do... if I do what I do not want, it is no longer me doing it, but sin that dwells within me.*

It sounds like he's saying he's been hijacked, doesn't it.

This is Paul-formerly-Saul, talking. Chances are, he didn't talk like this before his encounter with the Christ. As Saul, he was sure of himself. He knew what was right and what was wrong.

Sounds familiar. We can understand that kind of stance, too, especially when we feel strongly about something.

But as Paul, he is not so trusting of himself. He can't be perfect. Same with Martin Luther, almost 1500 years later. It's not that the law isn't important, it's that it sets him up to see that he can't be perfect. He concludes by saying, "thank God for Jesus Christ." *I'm not who I hope to be, thank God for grace.*

Both Jesus and Paul loved and followed the law as good Jews. Considered the law essential, a gift of grace. And, knew our attempts to be perfect can bring out our shadow side.

Paul recognized that the law as he followed it gave him certainty and a kind of rigidity because of his expertise in it. Now, Christian clergy do this with Scripture. This misplaced certainty causes harm. That tends to happen in every religion - the lure of certainty hijacking humility.

The lectionary has offered a lot of Paul lately, with a heavy dose of sin. That we are enslaved to it. Some people cringe when they hear the word "sin." It may conjure up memories of "fire and brimstone" Christianity attempting to scare people into good behavior.

We're not quick to use the word sin, for a variety of reasons, but a valid reason is that the very word makes people defensive instead of open. I think people need to be open in order to recognize their sin *in the first place*. So I ask, what makes people open — to their failures, errors and idiocy? What makes me open to mine?

Studies consistently confirm what we already know — people resist admitting mistakes. We will double over backwards to maintain an illusion of rightness. One study from Europe found that people who refused to apologize after a mistake had more self-esteem and felt more in control and powerful than those who did not refuse.¹ The discomfort of being wrong, the stress of thinking of ourselves as less than we assume, creates *cognitive dissonance*.

The term comes from the 1950s psychologist Leon Festinger. He studied a small religious group in the midwest. They believed a flying saucer would rescue them from an apocalypse they predicted would begin on Dec. 20, 1954. When the date came and went, the group doubled down on their belief, saying God had simply decided to spare them. They coped with their cognitive dissonance by clinging to a justification,² instead of admitting they were wrong.

Because of his own experience as a know-it-all, Paul understood rigidity, and his answer to it *in others* was not to retort with more rigidity, but the message of grace. But what role does sin have in all this?

Let's use the word "separate" for "sin" and create a thought experiment. You and your friend are on a small boat, fishing. After an hour or so, something tugs on your friend's line. It is much bigger than anything either of you have encountered, and you tell your friend it's not worth it, cut the line - you don't eat fish anyway!

But your friend gets his pride involved and wants to show off a good catch. He asks for your help, and you say "no," but then end up having to help him because he's going over the side of the boat. You reach to help but fall into the water, too.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/22/smarter-living/why-its-so-hard-to-admit-youre-wrong.html>

² Ibid.

Somehow you are able to grab the edge and climb back in. The tide churns and your friend gets pulled further and further away from the boat. He's not a strong swimmer. He is now **separate** from you. His foolish behavior is responsible for his predicament, but in your attempt to help him you don't call out and say, "*You sinner, what are we going to do now!*"

You say, "*Let's try to get you back in the boat. Hang in there.*" But you're not Superman or Wonder Woman, with special powers. You try your best to figure out a way to collapse the separation.

Emphasizing separation doesn't help matters; in fact, can get discouraging for him as he swims toward the boat. You don't shout, "*You've got so far to go!*" You want him to remain open to the possibility that the gap between you can be bridged. You want him to be open, working toward resolution, not give up. When you see he can't tread water any longer, you jump back in the churning water and manage to get the both of you back on the boat.

Exhausted, he may say, "*Boy was I stupid. I should have listened to you.*" Or, he could go into blame mode, scolding you for not coming sooner, or for not helping earlier. He may even blame the fish. Another option - he could celebrate the adventure and ignore the fact that he put you both in harm's way.

Sin separates. Separation is the opposite of God's intention for society/humanity. I consider sexism sinful, but calling someone a sexist is unlikely to make him say, "*Yeah, I need to work on that.*" Racism is sinful, but how often does calling someone a racist change her?

Our brains **do** get hijacked. There is some neurological truth to this. Our automatic brains are quicker than our conscious, evaluating brain. We do things before we think about them. That is why **implicit bias** has such an impact. Our brains signal negativity when we see someone different, who looks different than we do, before we have a chance to challenge that assumption. That's why I am quick to acknowledge my racism, even though my conscious brain doesn't want to admit it and works to end it. Paul's point in speaking about himself as taken over by sin is to say, "*I'm not my ideal self, so thank goodness for God's grace.*" Our brains are unreliable, but grace is not.

This line of thinking is not to give people a pass. At our peril do we underestimate the power of those so “separate” they cause chaos and destruction. There are people I have had to separate from because their addiction to separation, to sin, is so corrosive. I’m not a savior. And we aren’t called to get into every boat! Some people need to be removed from society, or from positions of power.

But our question is not how to punish - there are other people charged with that responsibility - the role of religion is to question right living and how God intends for us to cross divides.

It starts with grace. That’s Paul’s point, too. We have to have grace toward ourselves, which comes from the grace we receive from on high. Again, I bring up, and close with James Baldwin. His writing is spellbinding in its incisive and prophetic demands.

“White people . . . have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this . . . the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”³

Amen.

³ Excerpt From: Resmaa Menakem. “My Grandmother's Hands.” Apple Books. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/my-grandmothers-hands/id1233808676>