

7-9-17 Sermon “Where Grace Begins” – Romans 7:15-25a

From the sound of things in our Epistle reading this morning, I think it’s safe to say that the Apostle Paul is having a rough day.

We can hear the angst in his voice, can’t we, almost see the beads of sweat forming on his forehead, as Paul wrestles in this text with his own behavior. “I do not understand my own actions; I know what is right, and I want to do it. And yet, at the end of the day I can’t. I always end up doing the very thing that I hate. I am captive to the Sin that dwells with in me. Wretched man that I am, who can save me from this body of death?!”

I have to admit, of all of Paul’s letters, this is the version of Paul that I most appreciate. I think I appreciate him because I can relate to him; he reminds me of myself. Paul is having a rough day...and I have my share of rough days too. Paul and I, perhaps Paul and you, share this internal conflict, this perpetual struggle with Sin.

Some of you may remember back in March, at the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent, we looked at another passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans where Paul describes the way he understands Sin and its power in the world. And it’s a little different than we might think. You may remember that for the Apostle Paul, Sin is Sin with a capital “S”.

Often those of us who have grown up in the church are more accustomed to thinking about “sins” – in the plural, with a lowercase s – as a long laundry list of those particular things that we have done wrong, mistakes we’ve made, commandments we’ve broken, etc.

But Paul is not really concerned about those “sins with a lowercase s”. The “capital S” sin that Paul is talking about is not the sum total of the things we’ve done wrong, but is rather a cosmic force, a power let loose in the world. Some might call it the power of Evil. If you believe a personified devil, you might call it the power of the Devil. However you want to think of it, it is clear that for Paul, Sin is not so much something we *do* as it is a force that comes upon us – that overpowers us and enslaves us so that even when we know what is right, even when we *want* to do that which is good, we, like Paul, often find ourselves instead doing “the things we hate.”

In the words of New Testament professor David Bartlett, “The fact that we want to do what is right shows us that what is right *is* right.” It speaks to our conscience, to God’s Law written on our hearts. “And the fact that we don’t do what we want to do shows us that there is something at work in our world even stronger than our principles.” The cosmic power of Sin is on the loose.

For those of you who might be a bit skeptical of all this talk of “cosmic forces of good and evil”, for those who think this sermon is starting to sound a little too “Dungeons and Dragons”, or like a fantasy novel gone wrong, I suggest another analogy, one that resonates well for me. Sin in Paul’s letters, this larger “Sin with a capital S”, is like a disease. Paul writes about how Sin dwells within him – in his very flesh – like a parasite, or cancerous cells, eating away at his good, healthy body. “It is no longer I that do it, says Paul, “But sin that dwells within me.”

Sin is like an eating disorder – like anorexia or bulimia – that so distorts our perspective of reality that what our disease tells us to do – not to eat, or to binge and purge – is the very thing that destroys us. “For I do not do what I want,” Paul says, “But I do the very thing I hate.”

Sin is like an addiction – to alcohol, or heroin, or gambling. Just like the disease of addiction, Sin enslaves us; Sin controls our will and makes us act in ways contrary to the desires of our hearts, in ways that we know will ultimately lead us to death. “I do not understand my

own actions.” Paul says, “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.”

This understanding of Sin as a disease like addiction, holds a particular resonance for many people of faith. Perhaps because it’s something we can our imaginations around, something concrete that we or our friends and family have experienced. Indeed, United Church of Christ pastor Rev. Shawnthea Monroe listens to Paul’s words in our text this morning and says that the honesty and humility with which Paul expresses his struggle with Sin takes her mind immediately to the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous.

“In some ways,” she writes, “I wonder if AA does church better than the Church does, especially when it comes to humility. In my affluent suburban congregation,” she says, “we are heavily invested in perfection – or at least, in the *illusion* of perfection. We invest wisely, dress appropriately, and worship discreetly. Our children, like our homes, are well-maintained and do us credit. Illness, failure, and loss are sources of shame and are therefore private experiences.”

Sound familiar?

Rev. Monroe says that on any given Sunday morning, she can look around at her well-to-do Midwestern congregation and see people who embody the motto “Never let ‘em see you sweat.” But God knows the truth, she says, and so, apparently, does Paul: We are *all* sweating.

That’s the good news of this text, perhaps even the *surprising* good news: that when it comes to Sin, we are all on the same page. Yes, we are a mess, but so is everyone else. We have all tried, and we have all failed. At the end of the day, every last one of us is both a saint *and* a sinner. We have all at some time or another, looked in the mirror and uttered Paul’s cry, “Wretched man that I am! Wretched woman that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?”

We are *all* sick with Sin, all on equal footing before God and one another, which means that we’re all in this business of grace and forgiveness and redemption *together*. And yet, were a stranger to the faith to walk into any given church on a Sunday morning, I’m not sure if that’s the impression they would get.

We don’t like to talk about our experience of Sin out loud with one another, do we? It’s certainly not polite conversation. When was the last time you made eye with someone during the Prayer of Confession or the Declaration of Forgiveness? Or named out loud a place in your life where you are struggling to live up to the teachings of Jesus and what you know to be right?

It’s not comfortable, is it? We don’t really like to talk about Sin and its power in the world, and we don’t really like to talk about Sin and its power in our own *lives*. I think Rev. Monroe is on to something: we don’t want to risk penetrating that “illusion of perfection.” We don’t want to admit that we don’t have it all together. We wear this illusion of perfection like a mask; we go about and say that we are “fine”, hoping that if we say those words enough, maybe eventually even *we* will believe that they’re true.

But friends, the truth of the Gospel is that the place where we abandon our illusion of perfection is the place where Grace begins.

“Come to me,” Jesus says, in our Gospel lesson this morning, “All you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Sin weighs us down, and so we reach for our masks. If you are anything like me, perhaps you have carried this mask – this *illusion* of perfection – so long that you’ve forgotten how *heavy* it is. You’ve forgotten how much energy it takes to always be “fine”. We become so used to wearing this mask, this illusion of perfection, that we put it on unconsciously, without thinking about it. Some days we forget we are even wearing it. It becomes like a pair of glasses or

contacts. We don't actively think about it as we move throughout our day, but we'd never leave home without it.

And yet. And yet, to truly experience the power of grace and forgiveness in our own lives, we have to summon the courage to go outside without our masks on.

What might it look like, I wonder, if we started to peel those masks away? What might it feel like to let go of our attachment to perfection, and of our shame when we inevitably fall short. What might happen if, even as we seek to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, we allowed ourselves to do so as the beautifully imperfect people that we are?

I wonder, when we put our masks down and look over at our neighbor, if we might begin to see ourselves reflected in their own, unmasked faces. If we might see in them the same Sin and brokenness, and the same beauty and Grace. If we might realize we have nothing to hide from someone who shares the same joy and pain, the same struggles and imperfections, that we do.

"Come to me," says Jesus, "All you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

I wonder, when we start to peel those masks away, if we might discover that the heavy burden we've been carrying has less to do with our Sin – our imperfection, our brokenness – than it does with the mask we wear to cover it up. I wonder if we might discover that the burden we are weary from carrying is the illusion of perfection itself.

"Come to me," Jesus says, "All you who 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."

Friends, what do you say we risk taking Jesus up on this offer? How about we trust him to carry that burden for a little while? What do you think might happen, here, in *this* congregation, if we take that chance and go outside without our masks on? *[Pause]*

For this I know is true: the place where we abandon the illusion of perfection is the very place where Grace begins.