

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“A Meditation”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, July 5, 2020

Romans 7:15-25

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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 sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 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.

Psalms 145:8-14

*The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.
All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
The LORD is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
The LORD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open now our spirits before your word. And we pray that your spirit would take our words, take the readings that we've heard from Paul and the Psalter, take the words we offer in our songs and in our prayers and transform them by the mystery of your spirit into your living word for us. Pray that that word of Christ would speak to us, would feed us, would encourage us, would comfort us, and would challenge us as well. We pray that that word would guide us into the ways of peace and justice as we live our lives thankful for all that you've done for us. We asked this and pray this in Christ's sacred name. Amen.

This section of Psalm 145 lifts up in spectacular language, the goodness of God, the gracious, merciful, loving presence of the Divine. How God blesses all that's been created, God watches over it, God's power is at work in it. Everything is fine and wonderful because the Lord is faithful in all His words and gracious in all His deeds. The Lord upholds all of us as we fall down and raises us up if we find ourselves bound down. This beautiful language of the Psalm cannot be more at odds with the passage that Tom read from Paul's letter to the Romans. In that letter, essentially Paul is saying that I am despicable, that what I want to do, albeit good and glorious for the Lord I cannot do because sin is at work in my life. So the question that I'm presenting to this morning, or the challenge is how do we reconcile these two witnesses to what is going on in our lives as people of faith? How do we take I want to do good but I can't no matter how hard I try and reconcile that with the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding and steadfast love, and looks over all of God's creation with compassion and goodness and kindness? How do we do that?

John Calvin, in his Systematic Theology, talks about the total depravity of humankind. When you hear that phrase, you think there's wait a second, what? There's we're all monsters are evil. And that's not what he's saying. What he's saying is that we as a people of faith do not have ultimate ability to become righteous before God. And that we rely solely on the power and promise and the life, faithful life, that Jesus Christ led for all of us. That in a sense that faithfulness of Christ and our sinfulness are somehow working together, working out our salvation, but we do not have the power within ourselves to ultimately cross that line. That is the work of Christ and the Spirit and God Almighty. It is not our work to do. Even though we try, even though we should try, there's always that energy of sin that's at work in our lives, thwarting our best efforts and bending our true desires for righteousness, for justice, to live mercifully and equitably in our land. So again, how do we bring these things together? One of the ways that I try to imagine Paul's letter to the Romans sounding different to our ear so that it's not such a personal letter directed to me or to you is to do a little bit of translation. Because Paul is writing that letter to a faith community in Rome, a group of people who want nothing more than to live faithful lives in the name of Jesus Christ, who want to trust God's promises in Christ, live them out and do good, and yet, the power of sin is at work in their lives just as it is in ours.

So, I re-translated Romans so that it's a corporate letter, and it captures the essence of what Paul was trying to get us to understand not only about ourselves but about our communities, our society, even, or maybe even about the whole world. We do not understand our own actions, for we do not do what we want, but we do the very thing that we hate to do. Now, if we do what we do not want, we agree that the law is good because the law is set up to give us boundaries about bad behavior. But, in fact, it is no longer we that do it, but sin that dwells within us and within our

society. We know that nothing good dwells within us and our society that is in our self-centered, self-serving, self-protecting, self-righteous thoughts and actions that deny our neighbors God's justice and the peace of Christ. We can will what is right, but we cannot do it, for we do not do what we want, but the evil that we do not want is what we do. Now, if we do what we do not want, it is no longer we that do it, but sin that dwells within us and within our society, and on and on it goes.

It sounds a little different when it's not your sin, an individual act, but instead, it's the corporate sin of society and communities, ours, the nation, the world population. This power of sin is at work, systematically, systemically, and at times, there's nothing we can do about it except trust in Jesus Christ and be open to the power of God to reconcile within us the fact that we're sinners who were saved by grace. I'm a sinner saved by grace. Sin and salvation, right next to each other or, in a sense, sin and all of its power that's at work within me or within you or within all of us together collectively, sin that does everything in its power to denounce God and pervert the glory of goodness and mercy and grace, all of that is wrapped, surrounded, embraced by the gracious and merciful salvation of our Lord, Jesus Christ. In a sense, the paradox becomes one. Our sinfulness embraced by God's love and grace and mercy. Our mistakes and our hurts that we cause others, embraced, surrounded, supported by God's grace and mercy and love. It's why I found some stories that talked about how God's grace and mercy and love can surround, stories of hurt, of oppression, of injustice, of sadness, of grief, how all of those hard miserable times in life, in a sense, are carried by God's grace. And if they're carried and surrounded, then they are somehow transformative, giving us a glimpse into the kingdom of God.

On New Year's Day in 1923, some neighbors heard a woman named Fannie Taylor, screaming. So, they set out to find her, and they located her. When they located her, she was covered in bruises and a neighbor who found her claimed that a black man had attacked her. The town that Fannie Taylor lived in was named Rosewood in Florida. At the time, there were about 200 people that lived in and around Rosewood, and most of those people were African Americans. In fact, later that year, it was almost entirely made up of black families, except for one white family which ran the general store. Mrs. Taylor's husband was so enraged that his wife was attacked - and the report was that a black man had done it - that he gathered a group of white friends and went in search of the black man who had harmed his wife. He and that party grew. Mobs began to show up and, eventually, the entire town of Rosewood and many of its residents were completely destroyed, with mobs of white men, members of the Ku Klux Klan, people from the neighboring communities coming together and burning down every house killing residents, basically trying to erase Rosewood off the map. As the mobs were approaching, many mothers and fathers sent their children into the nearby swamps to hide. For several days in the frigid temperatures of early January, children of all ages hid in the cold, scary, unsafe, and unfamiliar swamps, unsure of what to do next. One of those Rosewood children was named Oren Monroe. He was eight years old when he hid in the swamps cold and afraid. The Rosewood Massacre, as it's called, is but one example of how white Americans sought to destroy black lives in their midst. And for many communities, even in our own St. Louis, stories like this are often forgotten or buried. It's part of our history that we don't really want to talk about, that we don't know how to address. We'd rather forget it and move on.

But as we are keenly aware, the power of those incidents and the stories that emerged from them live on from generation to generation. Black families wondering, "Will anyone ever care for us? Will anyone help us? Will anyone acknowledge the pain and the hurt and the loss of life and property that has occurred, the injustice that has been served upon us?" Oren Monroe was probably one of those men. But in 1994, the state of Florida did something

extraordinary. The legislature passed a bill providing reparations to the victims of the Rosewood Massacre and to their descendants. The bill had overwhelming support because the residents and the law firm that they had hired had worked together to educate the legislators to understand the power of what has happened and that it's not something that's done and over with in history, but something that continues. And so, they decided to give direct payments to those still alive from that 1923 massacre, and they decided to give free tuition at in-state universities for any descendants of a Rosewood family victim.

One of those students is named Morgan Carter. She's a doctor, a pharmacy student at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. She is the granddaughter of Oren Monroe, who died not too long ago and was able to know that his granddaughter could go to college for free. In an article in the Washington Post, the writer says that the Rosewood story no longer continues on with a scared boy running through the woods and hiding in a swamp. The Rosewood story now continues on with graduation robes and diplomas, and potentially the family's first doctorate. The story of Rosewood no longer ends in fear and grief, but it carries on to a new day with a new hope for a better tomorrow. In a sense, the Rosewood story and the hurt, and the horror have been embraced, surrounded by a desire to do goodness, by a desire to do what is right, by a desire to restore justice, to name the sins of the past and say in some tangible way, "We're sorry." I see that as a story of how God can work even through a legislative body in order to write the wrongs of historical injustice. In a sense, God's love embracing the sinfulness of humankind. The next story about God's love surrounding us is a little more personal.

Last week, I had the horrible privilege of attending to my daughter in law's father's passing. He was in the hospital at SLU with liver failure and cancer, and his wife, Carolyn decided it was time to bring Stu home so that he could die surrounded by friends and family. On my first visit there, my son said just to let myself in, so I did, and as I walked into the living room, I noticed that there was a hospital bed with Stu lying in it. And then around his bed, were his wife and daughters, their husbands, some nieces and friends, all sitting really close to the bed, almost hanging on the bed rails. After I was there for a bit, prayed and sat vigil with them, my son escorted me to the porch, where we hugged and cried. And I said to him, "Sam, this is really hard, but important work. The grief and the hurt, the anger at God, all of it is so hard to deal with right now. But what you need to know is that you're surrounded by love and prayers. That you're being held in the middle of all of this witnessing that you're doing."

And then I left. The next time I was called over, the hospice nurse said it's close. So I went in, sat for a bit, anointed Stu's head with Holy oil and kissed him goodbye and said, "Stu, go in peace." Again, everyone in the family was right around the bed, holding his hands, rubbing his feet, laughing, talking, crying. They were there, right there, around that bed. They'd been there for days, bearing witness to Stu that he was loved and cared for. And it wasn't until I got back in the car by myself, before I had pulled out at the driveway that it dawned on me, but what I had said to my son on the porch, only days before he and Carolyn and Ashley and Jeff and Samantha were embodying for Stu. That as his liver and cancer ravaged his body, they were surrounding him with love. In a sense, they were holding him up, embracing him, loving him. They were the presence of God for a dying loved one.

We are sinners saved by grace. We don't have the power to save ourselves; we just can't do it. When we want to do the right thing, we often do the wrong thing, but every now and then, in the vote of a legislature worth the love of a family surrounding a loved one, we get a glimpse of God's goodness. We get a glimpse of what the Psalmist talks

about; that God is good and gracious to all of us, all of creation. That God's blessing is for all of us. So even when we can't see it, we need to trust that it's there. And every now and then, it'll be at work through us. Amen.