

What in the World?
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
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Text: Romans 7 & Matthew 11

In my Princeton Seminary Days way back in the 1980s, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to take a course on the Book of Romans with a renowned scholar on the Apostle Paul, Dr. J. Christian Beker. Dr. Beker literally wrote the book on Paul – here it is! – but he was as much known at the seminary for being a colorful character. Dr. Beker was an immigrant from the Netherlands, and he had a strong Dutch accent – he was loud and colorful and enjoyed Dutch beer; and when he came upon me in his class he took great pleasure in calling out my Dutch name as often as he could: “Vieeerrrrrsma”!!! And along with all that, Dr. Beker taught me a very helpful approach to studying Paul – Dr. Beker would read a passage and then say: “vat in da vorld is Paul talking about?” – “Viersma, what da heck is Paul saying here?” – he actually used more colorful language than that, but you get the idea. And although that may sound like simply an odd or humorous approach, it is something that over the years I have continued to find very useful.

For example, when Paul writes in Romans 7:

‘I don’t understand my actions – I don’t do what I want, but what I hate – so if I do what I don’t want then the law is good – but it isn’t me doing what I don’t want to do, it is sin, because there’s nothing good in who I am – I want what’s right but I don’t do it – so if I’m doing what I don’t want, it’s not me but the sin that dwells in me. So the law is that when I want to do good that evil is close at hand - in the real me I delight in God’s law, but another part of me is another law at war with that law in the real me, and I end up captive to that other part of me, the law of sin.’

Then I find it helpful to ask: “what in the world is Paul talking about here?!!!” – a passage like this can sound like hopelessly intricate and confusing stuff – and worse can sound simply esoteric or irrelevant for us. But Dr. Beker’s exasperated and irreverent sounding approach

actually came from the conviction that there is important and profound meaning in what Paul wrote, and that we need to wrestle with it, wrestle the meaning out of it, to find how it speaks to our lives.

So then, what about Paul's ramble in Romans 7 about the law of God, and the law of the mind, and the law of sin – about doing what we want and what we don't – about good and evil? Well, if you stay with it a while, and keep asking “what in the world?” – what emerges is something that is, dare I say, simple and profound about the human condition, which is this: we are stuck - stuck in brokenness and sin; humanity is captive to the very things that diminish humanity; evil and brokenness and sin have a hold that confounds our efforts to be free – that is the human reality and dilemma we live within, individually and corporately. That is something you can relate to, isn't it?

Well, let that sink in for a bit, as I want to switch gears and turn to the words of Jesus that we heard in the gospel of Matthew. And although it is done in a very different way than Paul, I actually think that Jesus is saying something much the same. Jesus describes what he sees in the people around him by quoting a simple proverb of the day - a children's song: “we played the flute for you and you didn't dance; we cried and you didn't mourn”. The gist of this proverb seems to be describing a person who can't decide what they want or who can't be happy with what they have – a contrarian. So why would Jesus say that at this point? – well, Jesus has been going about to the crowds - rich and poor, religious and sacrilegious – and like Paul, Jesus sees how people are caught in brokenness and evil – the diminishment of life done through them and to them. And yet, part of the problem for people is that they are attached to their brokenness. They say they want to get out of it, but... - offer them the stern guidance of John the Baptist and they say he's a crazy man; offer them the down-to-earth, even partying ways of Jesus, and they say he is irresponsible and immoral!

There is a sense in the human soul that it needs something – but part of the human condition is to not to embrace what meets the need – perhaps it is stubbornness, perhaps it is fear, perhaps it is just difficult. So then Jesus reflects a bit on this in the form of a prayer,

which seems to be a bit of reassurance for himself too – Jesus expresses gratitude that what he is doing may make sense to no one else, but it is the wisdom of God. Jesus the Messiah is right there before people’s eyes – the wisdom of God that they need – but in the midst of brokenness, it’s difficult for people to see it, hard to let go of brokenness and reach for wholeness.

OK – so back to Paul for a moment. Paul talks a lot about sin and law, about good and evil – and I wonder if the impulse when you hear that is for your mind to just sort of glaze over because that’s the typical stuff you hear about at church?! – talk about sin and evil as the bad things we and others do – about yourself and others as sinful and evil people. But what’s so fascinating about Paul is that’s not at all what he says! - Paul insistently speaks of sin and evil as NOT his true self, but instead speaks of a desire for wholeness as his inmost, deepest, truest self. So the real crisis that Paul sees is how his true desire for life and good is caught in the hold of death – stuck.

That’s very important to listen to – for how we understand both sin and ourselves. Because then we see that sin isn’t just isolated actions that you or I or others do that are bad – but that sin is much deeper and more serious than that: sin is the power of death - it is whatever diminishes life in any way, for you or for me or for others. Evil and brokenness are found most deeply in how humanity is trapped in patterns that perpetuate hurt and diminishment – stuck in ways of doing that are about death not life – that is the evil and tragedy of sin. And at the same time, Paul insists that these ways of death are not who we truly are. The despair for Paul isn’t that he is essentially sinful and evil – but that he is broken and stuck and cannot make himself whole – he wants life but cannot get there on his own. Paul’s cry – “who will rescue me?” – is the profound cry of life recognizing it cannot free itself from death - “who will rescue me?” – “Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ.”

Paul’s cry and answer bring us back to Jesus in the Matthew passage. Paul looks to Jesus Christ as the answer to his question – the way from death to life. And Jesus’ words in Matthew give us a picture of that – they are incredibly beautiful words: ‘come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest; take my yoke on you, learn

from me; I am gentle and humble and you will find rest for your souls; my yoke is easy; my burden is light' – words of Jesus that call out from the heart of God to the human heart and the human condition. To people caught in and burdened down by the brokenness of life, within and around them, Jesus says something stunning: you cannot unburden yourself AND you do not have to. The wisdom given is that the way out of our brokenness is not by trying harder to be good - not by feeling better or worse about yourself. The way of life over death is in being found by life itself in Jesus Christ – it is the power of God in Jesus Christ in which love and life are embodied in Jesus as stronger than sin and evil and brokenness – and it is in that fleshy love and life of Christ that there is freedom from the hold of death and brokenness.

So what does such wisdom look like? Well, it's time for an obligatory Appalachian Trail sermon illustration! Pastor Beth and our group got back from our epic hike about a month ago. And on the trail every year I sing a song about my backpack, sung to the tune of Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer! – and it's a song about how my bluish backpack makes my heavy load feel light. Now this is partly for raising my own spirits along the way – and partly because Beth and the kids insist that I sing! 😊 But there is truth in the song. In order to hike there are a lot of things I have to carry – heavy and bulky and small and essential – and it is literally the case that I could not manage to carry all those things without my backpack – my backpack makes the journey possible. Now this is far from a perfect image if you push the details too much, but what I find in Jesus' words is the wisdom that God in Christ does not come to take away all our burdens, but to help us carry them in a new way – in a way that makes life possible along the way. Jesus says that with him there is a way of carrying things that lightens the burden – that makes life possible with all there is to carry.

Does that sound like good news? or does that somehow sound a bit disappointing, or incomplete? – Paul cries out for a rescue from sin and death, and Jesus just says he'll make life's burdens easier to carry? But that is indeed the deep answer to the depths of Paul's cry, and ours, and the world's – the answer of God's wisdom. Because the true power of evil and brokenness is that it holds us in the illusion that we are stuck on our own – that we must free

ourselves or that we can do nothing at all. But the power of life in Jesus Christ is that God does not leave us on our own – when we cry out there is an answer: the truth and gift of God’s presence in all circumstances – the power and wisdom of true life – the Spirit of Christ gathering all our burdens into a bundle of grace for the journey – God’s lifegiving grace at work in our world to bring about life.

Paul may make it sound complicated – Jesus may make it sound gentle – but in the end this wisdom is radical. It is a radical word to our world, to our nation: that it is not simply by human power, not simply by technology or politics, not by military or economic might, that we will save ourselves or others – but in the wisdom of God’s grace for all that we move from death to life.

It is a radical message for the church – Hope Church, the Reformed Church, the whole church: it is not by making more perfect doctrines and higher fences to protect God’s honor that we will save ourselves or others – but in the wisdom of God’s grace for all that we move from death to life.

It is a radical message for each of us to hear – you cannot find a way out of your own brokenness – ‘who will rescue me?’ – “Come to me” – the wisdom of God’s lifegiving grace at work in and through you.

Which means I think, that the wisdom of God in Christ is about seeing the difference between the burden of death and the burden of grace. The burden of death in our lives and our world is to be stuck in brokenness and evil – burdens too much to carry - and it only becomes more difficult the harder we try. The burden of grace is to be in the midst of the very same things – but to hear the good news for ourselves and our world that these burdens are not who we truly are, not what this world truly is, but instead people and a world created for good and loved by God – and in all that we carry we are found by the way of life. We are freed to see that God’s lifegiving grace is our present and our future – that in Christ now and to life eternal, the power of God is present to transform all of life’s burdens into true life itself. Thanks be to God. AMEN.