

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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Come to the Wedding

Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, July 6, 2014

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Romans 7:15-25a and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

When I read today's lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, I felt my heart thump with recognition. *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* I know in my blood and bones what Paul is talking about. Examples:

Late at night, after a healthy, sufficient dinner, hunger strikes: I reach for an apple. Strangely, my hand comes back with a bag of Doritos. The morning alarm goes off: My mind says, "Get up and run around the reservoir, especially in this beautiful early summer light." But something else in me whispers, "You can use an extra hour of sleep." I hit Snooze a record number of times. Then, a free evening after the day's work is done: I intend to reach out to a friend, but somehow end up watching another NCIS rerun. Do you identify with this?

This passage from Romans has caused considerable debate through the years regarding who is speaking. Who is this "I" speaking? Augustine (and later the Reformation reformers) believed Paul is describing his own personal struggle and, by implication, the struggle that all Christians face. I can understand why Augustine would believe that. He was a bit of a wild child, sowed a lot of wild oats, and famously prayed, "God give me chastity ... but not yet."

On the other hand, early Church leaders (and later the Pietists in 17th-early 18th century, including John Wesley) thought Paul was describing the non-Christian life. Their argument: How could someone who was Christian be in the grip of sin? As far as I can tell, those two things are not mutually exclusive!

Full disclosure: scholars today are divided. There is good scholarship to support either position. So I feel on solid ground when I follow my heart's recognition and go with the interpretation that Paul is talking about his own experience. This inner struggle Paul is describing is one I know all too well. I think most people (Christian or otherwise), unless there is severe pathology, experience this inner struggle between wanting to do what they consider right and not actually doing it.

The word "sin" appears often in this passage. "Sin" is a pretty loaded word and means different things to different people. That's nothing new. The definition of sin has evolved through the centuries.

Paul's metaphor for sin is slavery. Sin as a state of separation, a state of broken relationship with God. In this state of separation, we put something else, someone else, even ourselves, in place of God. We miss the mark. Sin does sometimes takes us captive. But ultimately, Paul says—and we say at each baptism—sin does not win. Ultimately, God's love for us and for all creation wins.

Being baptized, becoming a Christian, doesn't exempt us from sin. That's why one of the questions in our Baptism vows is, "Whenever you fall into sin [not **if**, but **when**], will you repent and return to the Lord?" We answer, "I will, with God's help." Whenever we realize we have fallen into sin, whenever we have stumbled into broken relationship with God/others/self, whenever we have missed the mark, we can repent (turn around, change our thinking) and make our way back, sure of God's joy and welcome. The completely mind-blowing thing to me is that there is no limit to the number of times a day/hour/minute God is willing to welcome us back. Unlimited. 70 x 7. Infinite.

Trying to live a Christian life isn't easy. There is a constant tension between living in this world of ours and living in the kingdom of God. Living in that tension can feel like having a tug of war going on inside us. Sometimes we mess up, and sometimes—with God's help—we are strong enough to make life-giving choices that help bring about God's kingdom here on earth.

I don't believe God is calling any of us to be perfect, to do everything right all the time. (Please recognize what a strong statement that is from this recovering perfectionist!) God doesn't call us to be perfect. God calls us to live in that very human tension. Church is about helping each other live in that tension. Living in the tension produces more questions than answers. I say thanks be to God for that, for where there are questions, there is a person alive, seeking, actively engaged in growing. As Irenaeus reminds us, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive."

Our Gospel from Matthew also has something to say about living in tension. Though I immediately resonated with Paul's words, it took a bit of digging and wrestling before Matthew's message began to resonate with me. Here's what I mean.

Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'"

Children playing in the marketplaces is a traditional Middle Eastern game called "Weddings and Funerals." * A scene Jesus' audience would have known well. The same way we're familiar with children playing games in the town square, in our parks, in schoolyards. In "Weddings and Funerals," the boys take the lead in calling the group to take part in a mock wedding. It's the men in their culture who take the lead in playing the music and dancing at weddings. So the boys play music on toy instruments and the girls join in the dance. After a while, the music shifts to a more somber, mournful tone and the girls take the lead, with shrill ululations and wailings and beating their breasts in a mock funeral. In their culture, women lead the mourning at funerals.

Though it's a traditional Middle Eastern children's game, we know this funeral scene because we've been watching it over and over, as the violent killings and funerals of the teenagers in Israel and Palestine have unfolded this week.

The children's game isn't about winning. It just shifts back and forth from weddings to funerals and back again, over and over, not just to pass the time, but as a way of learning and socializing for adult roles.

But the game has broken down. No one is playing. The boys are shouting to the girls, “We played the flute for you, and you wouldn’t dance.” The girls shout back, “We wailed and you would not weep.” It’s turned into the “blame game.” The two groups are dependent on each other; they need each other for things to work properly, but they are getting nowhere. They’re not just sitting quietly or taking their marbles and going home; each group is blaming the other. Does this sound familiar?

Here’s the part I didn’t realize, but Jesus’ audience would have recognized right away. Those words Jesus quotes from the children’s broken-down game are from the Book of Ecclesiastes: *For everything there is a season ... a time to be born, and a time to die; ... a time to tear down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.* (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4)

This is a description of how things should be, how Creation is meant to be, as set out by Wisdom (capital W), the Wisdom of God. For the writer of Ecclesiastes, the opposite of Wisdom is vanity. Vanity is like the wind, blowing round and round, getting nowhere, the breakdown of the game.

Jesus is not only teaching in a startling and subtle way. He is personifying Wisdom coming into the world. The miracles Jesus has done are not just “products of a wonder-worker; they are what happens when the Creator is in the midst of his people, making creation alive and new, bursting with potential. When Jesus ate with sinners, he is not just getting a free meal or being a glutton. He is making those meals into signs of the wedding feast that is coming, the one being prepared by the Wisdom of God. In God’s world, in God’s kingdom, there is a time and a season and a point to everything, and it will end in rejoicing.”

I wonder if those listening to Jesus got what he was saying? I wonder if they, even for a moment, caught a glimpse of God breaking into the world in a new way? I wonder if, even for a moment, they saw the world in a new way—as a world continually being defined and formed by God’s creative desire, a desire that can pull them with it and into it, into something more?

Do you think those listening to Jesus got what he was saying? Do **we**?

May we “hear, breathing through the pages of our Scriptures, [the voice of Wisdom], the voice of the bridegroom, laughing tenderly at our waywardness and [calling] us, coaxing us, encouraging us, to come to the wedding.”

Amen.

* I am indebted to James Alison for his scholarship and ideas on this passage from Matthew, as presented in his book *Broken Hearts and New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal*, Continuum, c. 2010. Chapter 6 contains a full, rich exploration of this text, well worth reading.

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