

# The Summer of Men Behaving Badly

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,  
at the eleven o'clock service, July 3, 2011, The Third Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Romans 7:15-25a and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.*

This morning preachers around the country will feel compelled to acknowledge the fact that tomorrow is the Fourth of July. I feel that tug myself although I have to admit that sermons which try too hard to do both God and country never work so well for me. The best I have to offer to you is my simple Trinitarian position. I love my country; I am totally perplexed by it; and becoming something other than an American would be about as natural for me as becoming a Hindu. Which is to say, not natural and not likely to happen. Although I still get the words of the National Anthem mixed up and think the high notes are a little unreasonable, hearing it played and sung in the right setting gives me chill bumps every time. Go figure. It's complicated.

So today instead of talking about patriotism, I am going to talk about sin, which is somewhat perverse I fear. On this day we should be so glad that you are here that we serve you donuts and ice cream, not talk to you about sin! This may once and for all answer the eternal question of whether you should attend church on a holiday weekend!

Paul's letter to the Romans is brilliant. In it he addresses all the big questions; and though we may quibble with some of his conclusions, he more than any other person is responsible for how Christianity emerged and for much of what we believe. If we can get over blaming him for many things he did not write—passages about wives submitting to their husbands, for example—what we find is a man who very effectively uses his own story and struggle to teach us. This passage is a great example. At the start, Paul, not celebrated for his humility, makes an astonishing admission that rings true for all of us, whether religious or not: "I do not understand my own actions." That confessional tone, 2000 years before Oprah, is thoroughly modern and quite compelling. And then he adds the classic presentation of the hopelessness of the human condition: "O wretched man that I am. That which I would do, I do not; that which I would not do, I do."

Though the summer has barely begun, this one already could be dubbed "The Summer of Men Behaving Badly"; and, yet, that very public treatment of sin, though it is not usually called that, is part of the problem. We tend to either trivialize sin or sensationalize it. Neither gets to the heart of the brokenness that lies under either of these vivid acts of betrayal or the lesser ones that eat away at our souls. Nor do they truly foster serious discourse about how we live and by what rules we live. In questioning some of the ways of understanding fidelity and commitment, Mark Oppenheimer, in his article in the *New York Times Magazine* today, suggests that the questions may be bigger than we even imagined. Though his words are not comforting, they do purport a level of honesty that is worth thinking about.

I do not know an honest person who will not admit resonance with Paul in his words about wanting to do right even as we repeatedly do wrong. We are less likely than he to define the struggle in terms of our wretchedness and captivity to sin, but we recognize the experience of foiled efforts, of resolutions gone unheeded, of best intentions shattered, often with ignominious results. In the Episcopal Church we are accused of not talking enough about sin. I frankly think the critics are correct or at least not all wrong: as with much religious language, we so want to be distinguished from the far right that we are timid in our talk about what separates us from God. There is great consequence in that, not eternal damnation, for God's sake, but very real peril. A life lived without a place for an honest conversation about how often we fail and how deeply God wants a better life for us will never bring us the spiritual depth we desire. In our admission of ambiguity and complexity, both of which are utterly real and essential to any honest consideration of how we live, we have too easily decided to avoid strong statements of right and wrong. In so doing—at least in the extreme—we fail to perform a critical function of the faith community: to serve as a place of

hardnosed discourse about the moral center of our lives. Morality is not the exclusive domain of the faithful, far from it. Many totally non-religious people are impeccably moral. But faith without a moral dimension, faith that makes no claim about righteous living, is worse than tepid; it is a club without values.

The struggle Paul identifies is not one we are too sophisticated or too progressive to engage. We need to live in that struggle, for it keeps us honest with ourselves and with one another. More often than not in determining how to act, we are fully capable of knowing the more loving way; and when we choose not to act lovingly, we suffer the fissure such a choice creates between God and us. “Anything Goes” is a great slogan and beyond a doubt the best revival on Broadway this year, but it is not the simple truth.

A book to put on your summer reading list is *Being Wrong*, written by Katherine Schulz, a freelance journalist, who knows more than her relative young life by rights should allow. Though not a religious book, its message is clearly redolent of our conversation about this struggle to be better people, to do that which we would do rather than what we would not do. She writes masterfully about the damage done by our unexamined desire to be right at all costs—including the truth. It is a desire that carries a high price tag, she claims, including serious damage to our most precious relationships and to the creativity that comes from being able to admit that we are wrong. In my experience the biggest contributor to unhappy, intimate relationships is less the “big” stuff and more a power struggle between two people with each refusing to admit that he or she is wrong. The miles I have gone in the wrong direction, even after it was painfully evident even to casual bystanders that I was mistaken, just because I didn’t want to admit being wrong, would stretch around the globe!

So again I ask where is the Good News? Are we doomed to lives of hardheaded sin, almost involuntary sin, always missing the mark? In some ways, yes, we probably are. Like Paul we have to admit that it is difficult to live a truly righteous life; it is hard to always take the high road when it is easier not to and, let’s face it, when it is so much more fun not to.

But here is the Good News, found in the words of Jesus: “Come unto me, all of you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Now I know it seems that in every sermon one of us reminds us that we cannot know precisely what Jesus said, that every quote attributed to him must be exegeted with an eye to the agenda of the narrator, that no recorded memory is free of interpretation. Yada yada. I know, I know; but listen to me: Jesus really said these words or some just like them. The crowd hearing him was worn to the ground by their failure to live up to the Law. In Pharisaic Judaism purity and perfection were God’s other names. God could have nothing to do with a failure or imperfection. Only those with clean hands and a pure heart could come to God. The rules were met or God was not available.

Jesus spoke these words and lived his life in a way that brought relief to that barren religious land, not freedom from the requirement to live holy lives but the holiness of forgiveness that made it possible to keep trying. The reason I am cocky enough to say that Jesus really said these words is that I hear them in my heart. We still need to hear them: comfortable words, words that without judgment invite us to rest, to lighten the load of trying so hard for awhile, and then to keep on trying knowing that we are loved no matter what.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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