

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 10, Year A

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Today I want to return to the message of Romans, this wonderful letter of St. Paul's that we read in the summer months every three years.

A little over a month ago I introduced Romans, and at that time I tried to show how Paul was going to argue that the way of Christ was a way of living by an internal guidance mechanism given to us by the Holy Spirit, rather than living by the external demands of rules and laws.

The starting place from which Paul is going to argue all these things is that none of us is better than our neighbor. Near the beginning of Romans Paul will point out that "all have fallen short" and that "none are righteous in the sight of God." In other words, to become a good person is to accept goodness as a gift from God. The goodness we achieve by our own efforts and our own will power will fall short and fall apart.

The three questions I offered when we first started reading Romans together were:

- ✍ Is your life happier, lovelier, more joyful and more free by thinking that you are better than your neighbor?
- ✍ Would you rather live a life of spirit governed freedom or a life that constantly fails to measure up to an external standard?
- ✍ Would you be willing to stop trying to make everything work by your own effort and accept that God is trying to give you the very best things as a totally free, no strings attached gift?

Now let me see if I can take this a little deeper for you, and make it a little more concrete in your life.

Here's the problem for Paul. Everything we know about Paul reinforces that he had a Type A personality. He was a perfectionist. He was driven. He was an overachiever who was proud of the fact that he got the best grades in Rabbi school. He was a name dropper. In other words, he was probably the first Episcopalian.

Paul was committed to being the most righteous, the most observant, the most faithful Jew of his day. In fact he worked so hard at it that he resented those who neglected the faith and didn't take it seriously. He despised those who wanted to change the faith based on some new theology or new understanding. He was so jealous for the faith that he would rather see someone stoned to death than to permit them to teach something new – specifically to teach that Jesus of Nazareth was the incarnate Son of God.

What Paul came to see, through the hindsight lens of deep conversion, was that for all his striving, for all his best efforts, he was never able to achieve the kind of moral perfection and godly righteousness he sought. When his anger at the Jesus movement brought him face to face with the resurrected Christ, he felt shame and sorrow for his hatefulness, his persecution, and his inability to listen to the truth.

What surprised him was not that he felt so bad, but that he could be forgiven. Christ forgave him. The Christians forgave him. He saw himself as one who had fallen short of everything he thought he could be, and he came to despise himself more than what he had hated in the Christians. But, others forgave him. Others even loved him.

As his remorse opened his eyes he received not only forgiveness and love, but he also received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the life energy of God's own being. The life of Jesus Christ opens the way for people like Paul, people like you and me, to receive God's own spirit as a resident of our bodies. What Paul found, and what you and I can find, is that in partnership with the Holy Spirit there is a life transforming power. The Holy Spirit creates new mental processes and a new kind of intelligence that can radically change our outlook on the world.

This is what happened to St. Paul, who changed from being hateful and murderous to seeing the whole world as a shiny bright new creation. He had been a Jewish Chauvinist who was able to see Greeks and Gentiles as brothers and sisters.

This is what happened to Clifton Davis, a middling TV star whose addiction to cocaine and heroine brought him to a decisive moment between suicide and prayer. In an instant of transformation Davis was released from the drug addictions, briefly returned to TV as the Preacher in Amen, and went from there into full time ministry. He is, as Paul was, a changed man.

This is what happened to John Newton, an entrepreneurial business man who knew that the bottom line was profit and everything else was compromise. His traffic in African men, women and children to furnish slaves for the New World was a business venture, until like Paul the Lord confronted him. He marked the anniversary of his conversion every year after, and became a tireless opponent of slavery. We know him best as the author of "Amazing Grace, . . . that saved a wretch like me."

This is what happened to Teresa of Avila, a devout nun in northern Spain, who lived an outwardly blameless life but in secret was miserable and despondent. At the moment she learned to recognize the spirit's leading in her life she felt transformed in a unity with Christ she described as ecstasy.

This is what happened to me, at a self doubting, self loathing point in my young life, when I doubted that I had any lovable quality, any worth at all.

What Paul learned was that for all his effort to be righteous that kind of righteousness was being built on the platform of his own sinful nature. If the foundation is the sinful nature, the structure built on top of it will be a sinful structure, in spite of all the claim and protests that we want to build a godly character. So long as the desire to be good is based on a fallen nature that essentially distrusts and fears goodness, what hope is there?

When Paul received forgiveness and love he began to open mind and his thinking to the mind and thought of Christ – to the Holy Spirit. Now comes the beauty of this redeemed life Christ offers us. Once the Holy Spirit becomes the source of goodness and righteousness, then the foundation is godly as well as the character built upon it. What we have to learn is what Paul learned – by giving more and more of the control of our lives over to this spirit of God, we will be carried more and more into the kind of righteousness, the kind of goodness that we cannot create by our own effort. What Paul describes is that when we live by the spirit we learn to practice spirit living, and this builds in us the kind of character that is truly admirable, truly lovely.

Paraphrasing Paul, if we live by our unrepentant human nature, what we will bump into time and again is death. Fear of death. The futility of life in the midst of death. Failure as a constant reminder of death. Corruption and decay in everything we see.

However, if we learn to live by the holy nature of God's freely given Spirit, what we are amazed to see at every turn is life. Life in the midst of death. New chances as new life. Resurrection at every corner. The world as if it is being made new for us every day.

Another way to put it is Jimi Hendrix versus Cat Stevens. "Purple haze all around, don't know if I'm comin up or down. Am I happy or in misery?" Cat Stevens borrowed the words from Eleanor Farjeon's hymn that is number 7 in our hymnal: "Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning; Born of the one light, Eden saw play; Praise with elation, praise every morning God's recreation of the new day."

This is the transformation Paul wants to show us the way to.

Can you all come back next Sunday? I want to take us a little further into this understanding, into the fullness of Paul's teaching. If you can't come on Sunday, perhaps you can catch up with what I say on our web page. The program has our information for logging in.