

Sermon for St. James Day

Proper 11, Year A

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An old preacher was dying. He sent a message for two members of his church to come and see him. One was a banker implicated in the most predatory of all the sub-prime lending schemes, and one was a lawyer notorious for handling clients involved in drug traffic and organized crime.

When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled, and stared at the ceiling. For a time, no one said anything.

The banker and the lawyer were both puzzled and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. The preacher had often shown dislike for both of them. They both remembered his pointed sermons about greed, selfishness, and avaricious behaviour, delivered while looking directly at them.

Finally, the banker said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to come?"

The old preacher sighed, and mustered up the strength to say, "Jesus died between two thieves, and that's how I want to go."

Paul's letter to the Romans is the only one of his letters we have where Paul had not been the founder of the church. His letters to the Corinthians and Philippians and Colossians and Thessalonians were all based on the fact that he had been a founding apostle. To those churches he wrote with personal advice about how to continue as the Christian community he had taught them to be. But he had never been to Rome before. Paul wrote the Romans to introduce himself to them, and because he didn't have any basis for given them any advice or answering their questions, Romans is the most careful description of what he believed and taught among all of his letters.

Up to this point in reflecting on Romans I've focussed on Paul's emphasis on how living by the spirit supersedes living by the law. Again, let me restate the basic argument to this point.

Paul begins by describing how every human being is a fallen sinner. This is key. No one, Paul says, even the kindest old lady or the the most endearing child, can claim to be perfect and without sin. Don't forget — not one kind old lady was born that way; and the endearing child who smiles at you at the restaurant is only an hour away from the next in a long string of temper tantrums.

All the rules and regulations about how to be a perfect person fail us. The Ten Commandments, the rules about good manners, the lectures about honor and duty, the childhood punishments for misbehavior — all are meant to teach us to be good. But the next time we act out of greed, selfishness, bigotry, or jealousy, we recognize that the rules have not succeeded in overcoming our sinful nature.

This is the Law — Law with a capital L — that Paul calls the law of sin and death. The great capacity of this Law, this code of rules and expectations, is to prove to us that we will always fall short. Paul describes how hard he tried to be perfect, to live up to all the religious rules for piety and behavior in an effort to please God. Yet for all his focus on the details of the Law, he completely missed how he had become a

jealous, bitter, judgmental and hateful person. He was like the religious leaders Jesus so often criticized: On the outside he may have looked like the most faithfully religious person in town, but the inside was a mess of self-loathing and murderous rage.

However, Paul argued, the Law has an important place in our growth in faith. The gift of the Law is that it serves as the chaperone of our souls until we are ready lose ourselves in that faith that makes it possible for us to learn to live by the new law of the Spirit. The Law teaches us that there is an ideal to which we should aspire, a saintliness which we desire. The Law gives us a sense of right and wrong. And the Law teaches us to be broken hearted for our failings.

One way to understand the role of the Law is to think of it like a parent teaching a child to say please and thank-you. If you paid a parent a dime for every time they said to a child, “remember to say please; remember to say thank you,” all parents could afford to take their children to Hawaii. Three times. Every year. Twelve billion dimes is a lot of money. Somewhere in the progress of all that repetition, a child will finally remember on his or her own to say those words without prompting. Eventually the child will get into the habit of saying please and thank-you. Ideally, the child will become an adult who is governed no longer by remembering Mom or Dad nagging them, an adult no longer governed simply by the habit, but will have become an adult who is, at the heart of her or his being, a courteous person.

The Law — remember to say thank-you — forms a habit (the child always says thank-you), and eventually deepens into a spirit of courteous gratitude. And, when the Law has been fully integrated into the child’s consciousness, on the occasion when the child or adult forgets to say thank-you, there is a stinging sense of guilt and remorse.

It is that stinging sense of failure, that sense of guilt and remorse, that makes it possible for our repentance to become truly lively and life-giving. For if the only antidote to failure is to try harder, we are doomed run forever on a treadmill that leaves us exhausted but no further along than where we began. If to be scolded as a sinner makes me try harder not to be a sinner, I will only become more aware of what a sinner I am.

So, as Paul puts it, we have three options. One is to try harder to make what has never worked before, in fact never worked for anyone else in history, finally work for me. This is, by most accounts, the most popular option. A second option is to give up and decide that we shall no longer care about any standards, that we shall be god and a moral compass unto ourselves. The third option is to recognize that I do not have the power to free myself from sin, that I need the help of a savior who can set me free from this constant failure and guilt.

This is the power of the Law for salvation. If we did not have a Law of right and wrong, we would not be aware that we fall short. If we did not have a Law that encouraged us to try harder, we would not learn that we were powerless to succeed. If we did not have a Law that left us with the broken heart of genuine guilt, we would not be able to open our hands to the offer of help, the offer made by our savior Jesus Christ to set us free from sin and give us the power to live in the Spirit.

We live in a godless age, friends. We live at a time when there is hardly any social pressure at all to limit self gratification, self righteousness, and self serving disregard for others. We live in idolatrous awe of bottom lines and skeptical doubt that anyone tells the truth when it would cost them to do so. It takes a certain amount of effort, in the midst of all this competing static, to tune in to that inner longing to become a godly person, that holy desire to become a true saint in this life.

It takes a certain amount of discipline to tune in to that holy guilt that might make us ashamed to meet God face to face as we are. It is hard, in this age when so many count bad behavior as a necessary compromise, to suffer a truly broken heart over our own brokenness.

Where that intuition comes to life, not as neurotic guilt or as a replay of old tapes full of put downs, it is possible to recognize that we have no power over our broken nature, that indeed we must be healed if we are to become whole. The pathway into this Spirit life, this life of Spirit law and Spirit built character, is the acceptance of Jesus Christ as our healer, as our companion to free us from sin. We can't heal ourselves, not by all the effort we can muster. We can't ever be truly joyful living as if God has no claim on our lives. We can only find true joy, true peace, true faith, true love by asking our Savior Jesus Christ to give us his joy, his peace, his faith, his love.

We need not become religious kooks. We need only to receive that Christ gift that transforms us from over-working strident failures into radiant beacons of Spirit filled life.

May I pray with you?

Savior Christ, it can be frightening to admit that we need help. It can be hard to trust when we have been so often let down by others. Some of us are afraid that if we give our lives to you that you will make impossible demands of us and take away what we love. Even so, some of us here are ready to ask for your help to free us from our addictions, to free us from our fears, to free us from our old wounds and our old ways that we are tired of repeating. Some of us here need healing in our bodies, healing in our thinking and emotions. For everyone here who offers this prayer from the heart, touch something in them with your healing grace. Lift some burden from their life so that they may learn to trust you even more. Then fill us with your Holy Spirit and make us a church on fire with your love and radiant with your hope. You told us to ask for these things in faith, and so we ask them confidently. Savior, hear our prayers. Amen.