

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

THERE'S A STORY ABOUT A MAN WHO WOULD GO TO INTO THE REFRIGERATOR LATE AT NIGHT AND MAKE ONE OF THOSE LARGE, CREAMY CHOCOLATE SUNDAES WITH WHIP CREAM AND NUTS. IN THE QUIET OF THE NIGHT, WHEN HIS WIFE WAS NOT AROUND TO REMIND HIM HE SHOULDN'T EAT THAT, AND HIS DOG WAS CURLED UP AND FAST ASLEEP ON THE RUG IN THE FAMILY ROOM, THE MAN WOULD SLIP OUT INTO THE QUIET OF THE KITCHEN TO INDULGE HIS SWEET TOOTH. AS WITH SO MANY OF US, THAT DOES HAVE BROADENING CONSEQUENCES, AND THE MAN'S BODY WAS STARTING TO BROADEN EVER SO SLOWLY AND SURELY. LIKE MOST OF US, THE MAN WANTED TO GET CONTROL OF HIS HABIT. HE KNEW THAT HE WAS ADDICTED TO ICE CREAM, SUGAR, CHOCOLATE AND NUTS, AND SO HE WENT AND BOUGHT A CHAIN AND PADLOCK. HE ACTUALLY CHAINED THE REFRIGERATOR SHUT, PADLOCKED IT, AND THEN GAVE THE KEY TO HIS WIFE. ONE NIGHT, HIS WIFE HEARD THE CHAIN RATTLING ON THE REFRIGERATOR. SHE COULD HEAR HER HUSBAND MUBLING AND CURSING UNDER HIS BREATH THAT HE HAD GIVEN THE KEYS TO THE PADLOCK TO HIS WIFE. SHE GRADUALLY FELL BACK ASLEEP AND WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING TO FIND WHAT SEEMED TO BE PAW MARKS ON THE REFRIGERATOR DOOR AND TEETH MARKS ON THE PADLOCK; APPEARING THE MAN HAD COAXED HIS DOG TO TRY AND OPEN THE FRIDGE.

WE LAUGH BUT KNOW IT'S FUNDAMENTALLY TRUE. THAT WHICH I DON'T WANT TO DO, IS PRECISELY WHAT I DO. WE KNOW ALL TOO WELL WHAT THE APOSTLE PAUL IS TALKING ABOUT. UNLIKE SMALL CHILDREN, WHO CANNOT BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR ACTIONS DUE TO IGNORANCE, WE ARE FULLY CAPABLE OF DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG. WE KNOW WHAT TO DO; WE JUST CANNOT SEEM TO DO IT.

WHAT IS WORSE IS THAT THE CLOSER WE GET TO CHOOSING THE RIGHT, THE GREATER SEEMS THE TEMPTATION TO SIN. PAUL SAYS, "SO I FIND IT TO BE A LAW THAT WHEN I WANT TO DO WHAT IS GOOD, EVIL LIES CLOSE AT HAND."

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE PASSAGE FROM ROMANS THAT SOUNDS LIKE AN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS MEETING. "HI, MY NAME IS PAUL, AND I'M A SINNER." "HI, PAUL."

MAYBE IT'S THE HUMILITY OF THIS PASSAGE THAT REMINDS ME OF AN AA MEETING. MY DAD WAS SOBER FOR 1 YEAR AND 1 MONTH BEFORE HE DIED, CELEBRATING SOBRIETY AT THE AGE OF 80. FROM WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT THE AA MODEL, THERE IS NOTHING MAGICAL ABOUT IT; IT IS REALLY QUITE SIMPLE. YOU ADMIT YOU ARE POWERLESS IN THE FACE OF YOUR ADDICTION. YOU SURRENDER YOURSELF TO A HIGHER POWER. YOU CONFESS YOUR MISTAKES AND FIND WELCOME AND SUPPORT IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS. SMALL VICTORIES ARE CELEBRATED, AND LIFE IS LIVED ONE DAY AT A TIME.

IN SOME WAYS, AA DOES CHURCH BETTER THAN MANY CHURCHES DO, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO HUMILITY. OFTEN MANY CONGREGATIONS ARE HEAVILY INVESTED IN PERFECTION....OR AT LEAST THE ILLUSION OF PERFECTION. WE INVEST WISELY AND DRESS APPROPRIATELY. ILLNESS, FAILURE, AND LOSS ARE SOURCES OF SHAME AND ARE THEREFORE PRIVATE EXPERIENCES. MANY PEOPLE ATTEND WORSHIP UNDER THE MOTTO: 'NEVWR LET 'EM SEE YOU SWEAT.' BUT GOD KNOWS THE TRUTH AND SO DOES PAUL: WE ARE ALL SWEATING.

THAT IS THE POWER OF THIS PASSAGE FROM ROMANS. IN 11 SHORT VERSES, FIRST PAUL ASSURES THAT DOING THE RIGHT THING APART FROM GOD'S GRACE IS A LOSING BATTLE. IT IS NOT THAT WE ARE SIMPLY WEAK OR LAZY OR NOT TRYING HARD ENOUGH. THERE ARE FORCES AT WORK IN US WITH WHICH WE CANNOT CONTEND. THE WILL MAY BE STRONG, BUT THE FLESH RULES THE DAY.

LAST FALL I SUFFERED THROUGH WEEKS OF SHINGLES AND AS I READ OUR PASSAGE FROM ROMANS I THOUGHT IT'S ALMOST AS IF PAUL IS COMPARING SIN TO A SHINGLES VIRUS THAT RESIDES IN THE SPINAL COLUMN UNTIL IT IS ACTIVATED BY STRESS. SIN IS NOT JUST A BEHAVIORAL ABERRATION OR SOMETHING PAUL DOES OR DOES NOT DO. IT ACTUALLY RESIDES IN HIM. IT ACTUALLY RESIDES IN HIM, IT IS HOUSED IN HIM...LIKE A PARASITE LIVING OFF ITS HOST. IT WILL NOT STOP BEING DESTRUCTIVE, IT WILL NOT CEASE KILLING THE PERSON IT IS IN UNTIL IT IS REMOVED AND REPLACED BY SOMETHING STRONGER..IN PAUL'S VIEW, BY THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST.

THE SECOND THING PAUL ASSURES US IS THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THIS STRUGGLE; EVERYONE IS ENGAGED IN THE SAME HOPELESS BATTLE. I AM CONVINCED THAT ONE OF THE REASONS CHRISTIANS ARE SO RELUCTANT TO CONFESS THEIR FAILURES AND FACE THEIR SINS IS THAT EACH PERSON BELIEVES HE OR SHE IS THE WORST OFFENDER. THEN ALONG COMES PAUL WHO ACCURATELY DIAGNOSES THE STATE OF EVERY SOUL. YES, WE ARE A MESS, BUT SO IS EVERYONE ELSE. HALLELUJAH!

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ASKED WHAT DISTINGUISHES A CHRISTIAN FROM A “GOOD” OR VERY “NICE” PERSON?

HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER?

PERHAPS BY SOME OF THESE RESPONSES: I AM KNOWN AND LOVED BY A GENEROUS GOD. BEING A CHRISTIAN MEANS THAT I’M NOT ALONE WHEN I SUFFER; I’M ACCOMPANIED BY JESUS, WHO HAS EXPERIENCED PAIN, LOSS, BETRAYAL, AND DEATH. BEING A CHRISTIAN GIVES ME HOPE..HOPE FOR THIS LIFE AND FOR THE LIFE TO COME.

GOOD ANSWERS...REAL AND SOLID AND TRUE. YET INADEQUATE AND INCOMPLETE BECAUSE THERE’S SOMETHING ELSE, SOMETHING SHARPER AND MORE CHALLENGING...LESS COMFORTABLE THAT DISTINGUISHES CHRISTIANITY FROM ANY KIND OF GENERIC GOODNESS OR NICENESS.

WHAT DOES BEING A CHRISTIAN GIVE ME THAT BEING A GOOD PERSON DOES NOT? IT GIVES ME MY SINFULNESS. CHRISTIANITY LIBERATES ME WITH A TRUTH THAT CUTS BEFORE IT HEALS: THE TRUTH THAT SIN IS A DEADLY, DESTRUCTIVE FORCE AGAINST WHICH I AM HELPLESS AND POWERLESS...APART FROM THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS.

I’VE KNOWN MANY CHRISTIANS WHO DON’T LIKE THE WORD ‘SIN’ AND WOULD PREFER WE USE WORDS LIKE ‘MISTAKES’ OR ‘POOR CHOICES’. ALL THIS IS UNFORTUANTE, BECAUSE IN FACT, CHRISTIANITY’S CONCEPTION OF SIN IS SO LIBERATING. AS THEOLOGIAN BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR PUTS IT: “ABANDONING THE LANGUAGE OF SIN WILL NOT MAKE SIN GO AWAY. HUMAN BEINGS WILL CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE ALIENATION, DAMNATION AND DEATH NO MATTER WHAT WE CALL THEM. ABANDONING THE LANGUAGE WILL SIMPLY

LEAVE US SPEECHLESS BEFORE THEM, AND INCREASE OUR DENIAL OF THEIR PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES. IRONICALLY, IT WILL ALSO WEAKEN THE LANGUAGE OF GRACE, SINCE THE FULL IMPACT OF FORGIVENESS CANNOT BE FELT APART FROM THE FULL IMPACT OF WHAT HAS BEEN FORGIVEN.

EMBRACING PAUL'S WORDS ON SIN FREES US. IT TELLS US THE TRUTH, WHICH IS THAT WE ARE BOTH BEAUTIFUL AND BROKEN, MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE, BUT ENSLAVED TO SOMETHING THAT ACTIVELY WARS AGAINST OUR EFFORTS TO BE GOOD AND DO GOOD. TO USE THE WORD 'SIN' IS TO UNDERSTAND THAT WE NEED JESUS TO BE MORE THAN A GOOD ROLE MODEL, LIFE COACH OR MENTOR. WE NEED JESUS TO SAVE US..TO BREAK A POWER WE CANNOT BREAK OURSELVES. TO CONFESS, AS PAUL DOES, THAT WE ARE "WRETCHED" IN THE FACE OF SIN'S POWER, AND LOST WITHOUT THE CROSS.

A CONFIRMATION STUDENT ONCE COMPARED CHRISTIANS TO DUCKS SWIMMING IN A POND. OUR MOVEMENTS, SHE WROTE, APPEAR SMOOTH AND EASY AT ALL TIMES. WE GLIDE, WE PART THE WATER, WE SPLASH AND PLAY AND THRIVE. NO ONE (WE MAKE SURE), EVER PEEKS BENEATH THE SURFACE. NO ONE SEES THE TRUTH. THE EFFORT, THE FRENZY, THE EXHAUSTION. THE CONSTANT, FURIOUS PADDLING.

WE NEED JESUS TO SAVE US...TO BREAK THE POWERS OF EVIL WE CANNOT BREAK BY OURSELVES. WE CAN STOP THE DESPERATE PADDLING AND ADMIT AT LAST WE CANNOT CROSS THE VAST WATER ALONE. TO CONFESS, AS PAUL DOES, THAT WE ARE WRETCHED IN THE FACE OF SIN'S POWER. WHO WILL RESCUE US FROM THIS BODY OF DEATH? THANKS BE TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD! WE CAN TALK ABOUT SIN SO THAT WE CAN TALK ABOUT SALVATION! THANKS BE TO GOD.