

Romans 7:15-25

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Sermon

Sin is a powerful force in our world. It leads to death and destruction, sorrow and heartbreak. It can take what God has created Good and pervert it to be used for Evil. And when Paul speaks of Sin here, I think he speaks of the Sin that is spelled with a capital S - the force, the power, that comes from outside of ourselves, that resists the goodness of God within us. I think he's talking about something beyond the sin that we might spell with a lower-case s, those personal choices to rebel against God's law or our failings in pursuit of perfection that each of us commits on a personal scale every day. What Paul speaks of is that Capital S: Sin, that power that works within him to make him do the very thing that he hates.

The Nation whose birth we celebrate this weekend was made by people that God created and loved and called Good (just like God loved Paul - despite all of his faults). It has high ideals and stands for beautiful concepts that those of us who call it home should be proud to share with others, like the idea that all people are created equal, and that power over the government should rest in the hands of its citizens, and Liberty and Justice for All.

And yet, even in a nation as beautiful as this, that Capital S: Sin can move. Just like Paul tells us it moved in him, a man that God chose to share God's Good Word throughout the world and build up God's church. This kind of Sin can get ahold of what God has made good, and when it does, it doesn't like to let go.

I believe that it was this kind of Sin that has been at work in our nation since the days of slavery and was present in our community about a year ago this August, when our neighbor, a young man named Elijah McClain was killed.

The more I hear about what happened to him, the more I feel that something wasn't right. It sounds less like the dreams of our forefathers and more like the thing that they hated and were rebelling from on that first Fourth of July.

And I'm no judge and jury. I don't think I even think it's our really our most important job as Christians to go around pointing at the sins of anyone else. At least not in that Lower Case: S kind of way.

I mean, I wasn't even here when this happened. And I don't really know what is the right response.

But, as I read more and listen to our City Council, our Mayor, and our Chief of Police, the more I sense that the power of Sin with a Capital S was moving. And I do believe it is the job of every Christian to pay attention to that.

I mean, even I am beginning to feel the guilt of what happened that day in August when one of our neighbors called the police because they saw a young black man wearing a ski mask, and thought it looked suspicious. They probably called with every good intention to protect their neighbors, but still it seems that the power of Sin was moving.

And sure, it would be easy to point my finger at the Lower-Case sin, that personal failing, of someone else and demand that they pay the consequences for the inexplicable fact that our community allowed someone who had broken no laws to be put in a chokehold, injected with ketamine, and had his life taken at the age of 23. And it sounds like there are independent investigators and the governor of our state and even the FBI and the Department of Justice who are now beginning that work. And it's probably our duty as citizens to make sure that those investigations are completed, and that they find the truth. But, even if they do, is that not just a way for us to find a scapegoat, upon who we can heap the blame and guilt, and make us feel better for a while?

I wonder if the more pressing work for us, as Christians, is to find the Capital S: Sin that power that is working in each of us, and holding this nation we love back from living out the dreams that she upholds, this nation that was built to be good and serve as a blessing to the world.

For we are a people who delight in the Law of God in our inmost selves. We love what is good. But, still the truth is that Sin was thriving in the form of racism at our nation's beginnings. Even those who wrote that "All men are created equal" were holding other men as slaves. And that Sin still grasps at all of us who are influenced by that history and benefit from all that those slaves built.

And that's not a comfortable truth on a day like today. I think it makes me feel what Paul was feeling when he wrote our passage for today. He writes of how out of control he feels - to will that good be done, but to not be able to make it happen. To desire God's flourishing life to emanate from his every action, but to see himself actually doing the very thing that he hates.

- I feel the guilt of not having shown up in time to stop this awful thing from happening. Because I know that God has made us to be our brother's keeper and that we are called to love our neighbors - and if protecting their lives isn't love, then I don't know what is.
- I feel helpless to make sure that some kind of justice is served for him and his family. Nothing seems nearly big enough. And I feel so small in the face of the powers of this world.
- And when our Presbytery forwards me an email, like they did just this past week, from a pastor on the other side of the country, who is asking what we're doing to make sure that no one will have to die like this again: Well, I'm not sure I have a good enough answer. Because it feels like something else is in control.

And I don't know what to do with all that. But, I do know that I love this country too much, and God loves everyone who lives here far too much, to let Sin hold us back from our ideals forever.

- And I know that even the powers and principalities that move in this world, holding us back from our best selves, must one day come before the throne of this God who loves us so deeply.
- And this God who has The True Power over all creation.
- So even when we feel powerless and weak. God is strong and can make things right. God **can** find justice and create peace. God has the power to forgive and to heal. And certainly, God will ensure, that there will come a day when "He will wipe every tear from our eyes. For there will be no mourning or death, crying or pain. For the old order of things will have passed away. Including sin in all its forms. And God will rule forever."

So let us pray that the One who broke the chains of the people who were enslaved in this country, might come and break the chains that still hold us to the power of the Sin that moves amongst us.

Let us re-commit ourselves, not just to celebrating the good ideals of our forefathers, but to living them out, ever more fully, in an “even more perfect union” where all of our neighbors can benefit from a government that they can trust will serve and protect them.

- Let us examine ourselves and find those chains that hold us back from living out our grand ideals.
- Let us tell the truth, and confess the ways that we have done those things that we profess to hate.
- Let us do the work of penance, trying our best, to fix what was broken, and set the wrong right.
- Let us learn to live together, as if each person who lives amongst us Truly Was made Equal, in the image of God, and let us mutually pledge our lives and our fortunes and our sacred honor that their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will never be taken from any of them.

Because, when Elijah McClain’s life was taken, the right to life that was endowed upon him by his creator was unjustly stripped away by those who had no right to take it. And our community suffers for it - because who knows what God could have done with this person who played his violin for shelter animals. He was denied the right to live out the dreams that God had for him.

- And in his killing, our nation suffered too. When we were, once again, denied the opportunity to live out the dream that our forefathers had for us - that we might live in a country with liberty and justice for all.

Amen

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