



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 9A, JULY 9, 2023
ZECHARIAH 9:9-12; PSALM 145:8-15; ROMANS 7:15-25; MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

BUILDING TRUE CHARACTER (THE UNDIVIDED LIFE)



Romans 7:15-25a *[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!]*

Jeff was a sixth-grade boy who came home from school one day and told his parents that he was tired of being good. He was always the odd one out as other kids in class goofed off and did bad things, as adolescents are wont to do. He was tired of missing out on the fun.

His dad suggested he try a new thing on, try screwing around some, and see how it goes. Jeff was all for it.

The next day Jeff came home and said he was done screwing around. His dad asked him what happened. He said that as the teacher wrote on the blackboard with her back to the class, he threw a pencil at her. She turned and demanded the culprit confess. Jeff immediately raised his hand. She came toward him, insisting that he should not accept blame for others' bad behavior, and then turned to the boy next to Jeff, concluding he was the guilty one, and sent him out of the classroom.ⁱⁱ

A twelve-year-old's dalliance with being bad might not be the defining moment that will guide one's entire life, but the playful story may serve as a portal into this very challenging and important passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans, which has been sadly misconstrued by many through the centuries.

What defines a person's true character, and how is it honed? What does one do when we fall short of this true character we long to embody? What does this life of Christ have to do with helping us forge a cohesive character, an undivided life where mind and heart, soul and body are integrated with a full measure of grace? These are the questions St. Paul is addressing in this passage, and there is surely something for us to glean today.

The truth is you don't hear a lot of sermons preached here on the Letter to the Romans. It is dense, theologically contorted, at times obtuse in its anachronistic references, and the topic of "sin" is never more than a verse or two away. We get squirmy with so much talk of sin, right?!

But besides all that, the book is remarkable for its riches of grace, which if trusted, can unveil a delightful portal into the gift that this life of faith has to offer.

This was probably Paul's last letter that survives, written in 58 CE, as he was concluding a decade of church-planting in the Aegean region. It bears the marks of that immense pastoral experience and a mature capacity to mount a sustained theological argument, an excerpt of which we get in today's reading. As he writes the letter, Paul is returning to Jerusalem one last time before

heading to Rome and on to Spain. He's striving to justify why Jewish Christians can still adhere to Torah's food and purity laws and circumcision, while Gentile Christians need not embrace these requirements, and he's claiming that faith, not these works, is the measure of this life in Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

We would not be sitting here today were it not for Paul's efforts to hold the tensions between such early expressions of Christian practice, and he exhorts us all to stay focused on the central tenets of faith and the ways of life that help you embrace them. All else, he says, is *adiophora*, matters of lesser importance when it comes to the life of faith, so hold them lightly.

Have some fun and try using the word *adiophora* sometime this week when you're talking about things that don't really matter as much as we often think they do. Let it roll off your tongue...*adiophora*.

But I digress...

Paul's overarching theme is: stay focused on what is important, letting the lesser things fall back. And what is important is this honing of our true character which is defined by a deep sense that God is at work in our lives, and it is by God's grace that we can unfold to this beautiful reality. This is the centering point for this undivided life we seek.

But then he offers this tongue-twisting riddle: "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."

And there it is, this talk of "sin" that makes us squirm. We went a whole three verses there before it showed up, but it is perhaps helpful to understand he is not talking about individual acts—like throwing the pencil at the teacher. Rather, he is talking of sin as the state of being that comes when one's spirit is broken, is so divided that there is no cohesive capability to do the very thing we know in our truest selves that we want to do.

Surely we all have had that experience, when the wheels fall off, we miss the mark, we fall short of what we yearn for in our lives, and we feel the ache of knowing we are fractured in that moment.

Now Paul has been maligned for suggesting these are just matters of the body's deprave propensity for evil. He attributes it here to the flesh in a seemingly dualistic trope that the soul is worth saving, but the body is bad. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" It has been used for cruel purposes.

It is worth naming that the word he uses here for flesh and body is *sarx*, not *soma*. *Soma* is what he uses for the body, the temple given to

us to care for and honor. *Sarx* is a different word, with different meaning, used in some places in scripture to describe using one's body (*sarx*) or another's for dishonorable purposes, often in Roman temples where abusive practices of sexualized rituals developed.

Sarx is the root for our word, *sarcasm*—literally, speech that is flesh-tearing, *sarx*-chasm. It has no inherent value, and does harm by its very nature, but oh, how it feels good to be sarcastic, right?!

It is no accident that Paul uses *sarx* here, rather than *soma*, to describe this divided character, this rent existence that allows evil a field of play.

True character seeks to integrate mind and heart, soul and body in ways that are right, good and joyful—life-giving ways of being in the world. True character is something one *is*,

ⁱ https://buildfaith.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/659px-Paulus_St_Gallen.jpg

ⁱⁱ Adapted from a story told by Peter Marty, <https://peterwmarty.com/2018/11/07/an-undivided-life/>.

Much of the exegetical content on “true character” here is drawn from Marty’s essay on the Undivided Life.

ⁱⁱⁱ A full treatment of these tensions is beyond the scope of this sermon but suffice to say that the dualism often attributed to

not what one *has*. It is formed by spiritual practices that habituate (integrate) over time, and by relationships with others who encourage us on the way. This is why we form Christian community, to be companions and encouragers of mutuality, dignity and respect.

We profess faith in Jesus the Anointed One of God as the way, which is to say, we believe in the God whose grace is the catalyzing agent of this true character, even when we fall short of the mark.^{iv}

Because we do fall short of the mark, and we will again, and yet nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And for that may God’s holy name be praised.

Paul between Law and Faith is contrived and the letter warrants a much more nuanced reading.

^{iv} This reliance on God’s grace does not condone antinomianism, assuming that God will salvage us in the end so why bother trying to embrace good character. Nor does it justify a Manichaean approach to mortal life, rejecting the bodily form as altogether lost.