



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
July 5, 2020

*(if you have a prayer request you would like added to
the At- Home Worship service,
please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org.)*

Gathering Around God’s Word

*If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you
are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of
the service.*

Call to Worship

Come, all you who carry heavy burdens,
and Christ will give you rest.
For he is gentle and humble in heart:
In him we find rest for our souls.

Opening Hymn: *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*

#610

Call to Confession

God upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. Therefore let us confess our sin with every confidence that we will be lifted up.

Prayer of Confession

Holy One, we confess to you and to each other that we are tired and weighed down by the mistakes we have made, even in our closest relationships with our friends and our families. We give this burden to you, mindful of Jesus' promise that he will give us rest. We trust in you. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Friends, hear the good news of our faith: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, showing compassion to all.

The Word

Prayer for Illumination

Comforting God, by your Holy Spirit lift the burdens from our souls through the reading of your Word for us, that we may learn how easy it is to live in loving relationship with you. Amen.

Scripture Readings

New Testament Reading: Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for

you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

New Testament Reading: 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!

Reflection "The Distance from God to Humanity"
The Rev. David Ukropina

If I asked each of you this question, "Are we sinners?" I'm guessing that most people in this congregation would say, "Yes, we're sinners," this being a Presbyterian church and all. Still, if I asked a lot of people in my life if they were sinners, they would say no. It's true that a lot of them aren't Christians, but even among Christians, there are a lot of us who, even if we confess our sins, we privately think we're really not doing too bad.

I also think there's a fair amount of self-satisfaction in the church, as if sometimes we in the church are looking at the rest of the world and saying, "All of you are sinners," while those of us inside the church are safe and sin-free behind the church walls. As Christians, sometimes I think we're quick to pronounce ourselves righteous, and to say now that we're Christians, everything's fine. I don't know about you, but my life is still a struggle, between all the things I know I ought to do, and all the things I leave undone.

One of the historic spiritual practices of the church is to reflect upon our own sin. To do this, I would like to take a moment and consider 20th century history, which is not exactly an inspiring picture of human behavior. At the end of the 19th century, there were a lot of people talking about human progress and human perfectibility, as if some utopia might be just around the corner. But after the 20th century, two world wars, two nuclear bombs, the holocaust, and countless other terrors, it's a bit harder to avoid the fact of our human brokenness.

So that leads to the next question, what difference has Christ made to this situation. If all we had was this passage from Romans chapter seven to go by, the answer might seem to be, not much. Paul says, "I am sold into slavery under sin," "I do the very thing I hate," and "I am captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." What is Paul talking about here? Paul's the same person who said "anyone who is in Christ is a new creation," and "in Christ we are freed from sin," so what does he mean here?

Theologians have struggled through the centuries over what Paul is getting at in this passage. Some of them have argued that Paul's really

talking about how things used to be, before he became a Christian. Other theologians have argued that no, Paul is talking about how his life is now, even after becoming a Christian, and I find I have to agree with them. Notice that Paul does not use the past tense. He simply says, “Wretched man that I am” not “wretched man that I was.”

So again, what’s going on here? If anyone had been freed from sin, who was living in the Spirit, it would be Paul, right? The great apostle? And yet this would go against what Paul said earlier in Romans, that no one is righteous, not even one, not even him. And if I were to ask everyone in this community, did becoming a Christian immediately solve all of your problems and all of your personal struggles, I’m guessing the answer would be no.

Now that’s not to say we are all a bunch of axe-murderers or serial killers at heart. We generally want to do what’s good. We would agree with Paul that “I delight in the law of God in my inmost self.” The problem is that although we can will what is good, we can’t accomplish it. We are powerless to do it completely.

One of the things that Paul is setting up in this chapter and in the rest of Romans is a great tension between the perfect righteousness of almighty God, and the reality of us humans, which is something far less than that. And Paul absolutely refuses to lessen either of those claims. He will not lower the bar of God’s righteousness by saying, “Don’t worry. It’s really not that bad. God loves and forgives you, so it’s all o.k.” On the other hand, he also refuses to raise us up to God’s level, and pretend somehow we are on an equal footing with God.

So where is the good news in this passage? I think that we can see the first glimmer of good news in this section of Romans by noticing that it’s probably a sign that we are walking the Christian path if we are struggling with our sins.

Have you ever noticed that the most dangerous people in history have tended to think of themselves as innocent? Tyrants and mass murderers don’t go around struggling with their sin. The villain in the movie never thinks they are the villain. As one writer has said, Romans chapter seven gives a striking illustration of the struggle that follows when an imperfect person commits themselves to a perfect God.

What this enormous gap between God and us reveals is that the human crisis of sin is just too great for us to cross by our own efforts. It's like that line from the Dr. Seuss book *The Cat and the Hat*, where he writes "And this mess is so big/ And so deep and so tall,/ We can not pick it up./ There is no way at all." And in this glimpse of a crisis that is too great for us to solve is the beginning of the really good news that comes out of this passage.

The great reformer Martin Luther had a personal experience with this enormous gap between us and God, one that greatly influenced the entire Reformation. As a young monk, Luther tried to earn his salvation through rigorous and severe disciplines. His confessor even suspected Luther was inventing sins just so he could confess even more. Luther wrote that if ever a monk could have attained heaven through sheer effort, he was that monk.

And yet all of these spiritual disciplines, rigidly practiced, could not achieve for Luther what he most longed for, to be at home with God in Jesus Christ. In fact, his intense efforts only seemed to make him more miserable. Luther wrote, "I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailor and hangman of my poor soul."

Luther's confessor thought this young monk was doing way too much introspection, and so he assigned him to go and teach the Bible to students. Through his reading and teaching of books like Romans and Galatians, Luther had what we he called his great "tower experience" at the cloister tower in Wittenberg in 1519, in which he discovered that our salvation comes as a free gift of grace, and we can do nothing at all to earn it or achieve it. This personal experience of Luther's had an enormous impact on the whole Reformation, and on the whole course of western religious history.

Interestingly, the apostle Paul, as a young Pharisee, had a very similar experience in some ways to Luther. In the New Testament, Paul describes himself as a Pharisee of Pharisees, a vigorous practitioner of the law. Author Philip Yancey wrote of Paul, "If a person could reach God by obeying the law, then he, the strict Pharisee, would have done it." (*Meet the Bible*, p. 561)." In their own ways, both Luther and Paul discovered that we cannot bridge the gap between God and us through

sheer human effort.

For me personally, when I think about the good news of Romans seven, I can't help but think about a particular time in my own life. It happened when I was 18 years old, during my freshman year of college. As I've mentioned before, I grew up without being a Christian and without going to church, and I also grew up in a very competitive culture, where you were pretty much judged by how much you achieved.

And at that time in my life, I was achieving a lot. I went to a top college, I was getting straight A's, and I was trying really, really hard to do everything right, and I was miserable. I had been taught, and I believed, that if I just worked really hard and achieved enough, everything in life would be fine and I would be "safe", but despite all my efforts, that belief started falling apart.

If I had theological language at the time, what I was doing was trying to justify my life through my own efforts, and without any connection at all to God or to Jesus Christ, but I found that the harder I tried to make everything right, the further the goal got away from me. With Paul, I could will what was right, but I could not do it.

The experience felt awful. It felt like walking a narrowing tightrope, one that eventually just vanished out in front of me. I sort of felt like Wile E. Coyote from those Road Runner cartoons, after he's gone out over the edge of the cliff and is standing there with the ground dropped out beneath him.

Although I didn't have the language for it at the time, I felt like I had become aware of the gaping hole between where I was and where I deeply wanted to be. If the words had been available to me, I would have said with Paul, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Now in some ways this experience of mine was different than what Paul is talking about in Romans seven. This experience happened long before I became a Christian, and I wasn't trying to live up to God's law, but I was trying to perform to a standard that had been set for me. And I wasn't really, outwardly, visibly sinning.

And yet in some ways, I think this is exactly what Paul is talking about. He is talking about wanting so badly in your inmost self to do

what is good, and realizing that you can't. I'm not surprised Paul uses such strong language, saying "wretched man that I am." The word "wretch" sounds like something you do when you smell something really bad. I've been there, and I know what that feels like. It's like the helpless cry of every alcoholic or addict who truly wants to change, and finds that on their own power, they just can't do it.

And that is where the good news of Romans chapter seven comes breaking in. When we realize that we can't solve the problem, that the gap is too deep, that the human crisis is too great, when we give up all our own attempts to solve everything, when we collapse in frustration, in that moment we can realize that we do not have to solve the crisis, because there is a person who can. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that says where sin increased, grace increased more. It is the doorway through which we discover our total dependence on the grace of God.

When we recognize how great the crisis is, that there is no way to bridge it by ourselves, then we can begin to open up to the God who became human and achieved what we could not. By grace, it is God who takes the initiative in our lives. It is Jesus Christ who travels the distance from God to humanity. It is Jesus Christ who finds us, who bridges the gap of sin that separates us and God. It is here that we can say with Paul, "who, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Amen.

Responding to God's Word

Affirmation of Faith— from A Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God; preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal. Amen.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Compassionate God, you are good to all. Help us trust your Word and accept your invitation to find rest in you...

We pray for your church in all of its forms, that we may learn how to follow Jesus by giving rest to the weary in lives of service that are gentle and humble of heart....

We pray for the earth and all you have created and love, that all things may come back into the environmental balance that you first intended and all your works shall give thanks to you...

We pray for all people, their nations and leaders, that when the burdens of war, poverty and hunger are too much to bear, we may do our part to offer rest and peace...

We pray for all those who suffer violence in the streets and in their homes, that they might find safety and healing. We pray for those who are sick, those suffering mental illness, and those who struggle with moral dilemmas; uphold them and grant them peace...

Gracious and merciful God, creator of heaven and earth, we join our voices with all that you have made in blessing you and giving thanks to you, who, with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, show compassion and goodness to all. Let us now pray using the words Christ taught us...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

Closing Hymn: *Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing* #546

Charge and Benediction

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are
absent one from the other. -Genesis 31:49