

Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Zechariah 9:9-12

3 Pentecost A (proper 9)
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend WA
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Today's reading from Romans is one of those passages where the words seem to go around in circles, and the more you circle, the more your head swims. Reading Paul's new testament letters can be like that— so if you're scratching your head, or struggling to make sense out of these weekly snippets from Romans that are part of our lectionary throughout this summer, don't despair—you're not alone! Between Paul's first century writing style – with its rhetorical arguments which are foreign for us, and the reality that his social setting – and its mix of Jewish and Greco-roman culture and worldviews, together with this emerging Christian movement that was both defining its relationship with Judaism as well as sorting through some specific congregational and community issues, –is significantly different from ours, there a lot to wrap our heads around! Elizabeth+ has timed her sabbatical well – she misses all but one of these Romans texts...and I know that we Lutherans have a reputation for taking a lot of our theological cues from Paul's writings, so I'd be remiss if I let this text slide on by me.

So no matter what you think about Paul's writings – whether you love them, or wish that at least a few of them had been left out of the bible, or at least hope that the really convoluted passages never occur when it's your turn to read them in worship, his statement in verse 15-- *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* – rings true for us, I think, even across the expanse of time and differences in contexts that lie between us in 21st century North America and Paul in the first century Mediterranean.

I think we can all tell our own stories about the gap between our willing, and our doing, can't we? – whether it is a personal wrestling match with controlling those impulses that we know to be bad for us—or hurtful to others.... where “just say no” is easier said than done, or in the struggle to live up to our own expectations and ideals...where we envision perfection, but don't quite measure up.. or in all the stuff that we intend to get done in the course of the day...but when evening comes, somehow we didn't quite get to it. Or in those ways that we want others – especially our governmental leaders, clergy, spouses, partners, children, parents, congregation, favorite professional athletes, or UMPIRES to live up to our exacting standards for them—and become critical, demanding, merciless, angry, and even unforgiving when they disappoint us or fail to meet our –usually unspoken needs and hidden expectations...which is a variation on Paul's theme: “THEY do not do the good I want, but the very thing I hate is what THEY do!” This gap between our will and our ability to act in accordance with it is so pervasive that even when we see it ---and know it—and feel it---and know what we should do about it.-- we STILL find

ourselves getting stuck in variations of the same trap. *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

When Paul talks about sin, he is not referring to a list of “bad things”—not individual sins, but to a powerful force that holds us firmly in its grip, a brokenness that pervades every aspect of our life and affects our every move, and that we can’t escape from on our own. Sin is the broken relationship between us and God, between us and our neighbor—that is real no matter whether we are considered “relatively decent people” or not. And Paul isn’t trying to shirk responsibility for it when he says “it’s no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” He’s not being flip and saying “the devil made me do it. What Paul is trying to describe is the reality of being in the grip of sin’s power that is both beyond us and within us—but that is, in essence, is NOT US-- a reality that we would be more likely to describe using the language of addiction...

And it’s not that God holds back forgiveness until we fulfill the right formula by proving that we deserve it. In all of his spinning in this text, Paul helps us to see that God’s love for us has been there since the very beginning, that God’s grace is a power stronger than sin, and that God forgiveness has been here for us all along—ready to be experienced through our repentance, in our letting go, in our realizing that it is for us before we ask, and that it comes to us a pure gift. Paul, whose own conversion experience involved being interrupted in the middle of his path of persecuting the followers of Christ and being turned around and given new vision and new direction as a proclaimer of the gospel, calls us to lay down our every attempt at self-justification and self-promotion. Paul invites us to stop our futile attempts to swim upstream, and let the river of God’s mercy carry us, entrusting ourselves entirely to the grace of the God who comes among us with acceptance and love. This passage from Romans and the Gospel text are singing similar themes... As Paul points us to Christ...and Jesus invites us to find our rest in him. *Come to me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... Jesus says... Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, Jesus says. For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Jesus invites us to find our rest in him. Jesus offers us an end to the kind of anxious and restless spinning in circles that Paul describes in his letter to the Romans. Or, to quote St. Augustine, “our hearts are restless ‘till they find their rest in God.” Jesus invites us into the kind of rest that comes from living a life that is centered in God. This is not the sort of rest that would have us sitting on the beach soaking up the sunshine – (not that there’s anything wrong with that – it’s just not the kind of rest that Jesus is talking about). No, when Jesus talks about rest – the first association that should come to mind is “Sabbath” – the kind of rest that finds its center in God... and indeed, in the verses that follow today’s gospel text, Jesus is in conflict with the Pharisees about what it means to keep the Sabbath, the gist of which is the gospel’s claim that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. So when Jesus promises rest, Jesus promises *rest* -- the rest that is God’s final act of creation – the rest that is God’s first act of new creation – the rest that

creates time and space for us to be refreshed and renewed and re-centered in God so that we can be re-sent into our communities as members of Christ's body. It is this gift of rest that pulls us out of our trap of being caught between the good that we want and our inability to do it, that invites us off the merry-go-round of thinking that everything depends on us, and that if we stop for too long, we will fall so far behind that we won't ever be able to catch up. Jesus invites us into his rest, inviting us to lay down our burdens and take up his yoke.

To really hear what Jesus is saying, we need to remember that Roman soldiers could conscript local peasants to carry their gear for 1 mile (and only one mile)..which is why the sermon on the Mount's instruction to carry that burden for two miles is an act of non-violent resistance to the Roman occupation (the Roman soldier could get in big trouble with his superiors for breaking the rule)...so--in contrast to being compelled to carry a heavy burden for the Romans – a common occurrence, Jesus invites his hearers to take up the 'light' burden that he offers. In contrast to the roman demand that a heavy burden be carried for a mile, Jesus invites us to take up his yoke for a life time. In contrast to our anxious spinning, worrying about whether we ar good enough, Jesus invites us to find our rest in God...to embrace God's gift of Sabbath – to feast at God's banquet, to let go of every one of our burdens and take up the cross, his yoke, and follow.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Amen.