

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 4:6-7  
SECOND LESSON: Romans 7:15-25  
July 5, 2020  
ORDINARY COMMUNION

***“My Own Worst Enemy”***

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

One of the theologians I read this week spoke of his toddler granddaughter and her experience battling on the front lines of temptation. She sat in front of an electrical outlet. “Nooo,” she said to herself. “Nooo ... nooo.” And then of course what did she do? Reached out her hand to stick her fingers into the socket. Grandpa got her in time. We are our own worst enemies, but we don’t have to lose this battle.

This scriptural passage is what I consider the apostle Paul’s AA moment. He doesn’t point the finger. He doesn’t blame or condemn. He says, “This is what I struggle with.” And that’s why AA and NA and all of the other 12 step programs work. They avoid finger pointing, because it is an unfortunate but true fact of human nature that when someone tells us we are doing something wrong, the first thing that comes to our minds (and often our mouths) is denial. We do not respond well to having our flaws pointed out. It is a rare person who can say, “You know, you’re right. I shouldn’t have said or done that. I’m going to change my behavior because it’s wrong.” Think about how many times you’ve heard someone do that, or have been able to pull it off yourself. On the contrary, the first thing that comes out of our mouths is, I didn’t . . . I’m not . . . or, it’s someone else’s fault. But there is a way around the problem. It’s a very neat little side step. When a person shares *their own* struggles with a particular thought or behavior, it stops being threatening. It becomes safe for me to identify and recognize what is going on in my own life. There’s some space there. That’s why people share at meetings. Alcoholics and addicts help one another avoid the same pitfalls by sharing experiences.

So, here is Paul, the apostle Paul, the great and holy man himself saying, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but I do what I hate!” Paul is taking himself off any pedestal people may have put him on and talking about his own struggles with his sinful nature. There is no doubt here that good is good and bad is bad. Paul’s not arguing that. He’s not trying to rationalize his way out of being caught doing something bad. He’s saying, “*I know it’s bad! And (expletive) I did it anyway! What on earth is wrong with me?!*” In his innermost being Paul wants to do what is right, but he has discovered that there is a tug of war going on inside of him, and what is right doesn’t always win. Can anyone else relate to this, because I know I can!

Not only do we have one foot in the kingdom of God and one foot in the world, the conflict goes farther than that. We have part of ourselves that wants to do good and another part mocking and sticking its tongue out at us. I’m reminded of the old cartoons with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Paul expresses confusion at his own inconsistency. He doesn’t know why he’s not in better control of himself. And he describes his condition as wretched, a word that in the original Greek means to be beaten down by

hardship and misery. It's a constant strain. "Who," he asks, "will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" And then he provides the answer. "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

In our Old Testament reading today we have a story from pre-history. It is allegorical in nature. This is not the record of a literal conversation. It is an example of a basic human struggle. Cain's offering to God had been rejected and Abel's accepted. Cain was not happy about this And the Lord says to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

We all know that Cain did not "rule over it." "It," that is sin, ruled over him and he murdered his brother. It was a battle that he didn't even try to fight because he was angry, and anger enables us to justify a lot of unjustifiable things. We do things and we say things in anger that we would not otherwise do.

There is a tug of war going on inside of us, and a lot of days we are pretty evenly matched in the push-pull between good and evil. What makes the difference for us is that Christ has died for our sins and sent the Holy Spirit to empower transformation. We now have help on the inside to pull in the right direction. Of course, the downside to this is that there is a battle in the first place. Until we are in heaven that will continue to be the case. The upside is that we can now win.

All of this sounds great! So, what stops us? What stops us is we don't want to admit to ourselves or others when we're wrong. While it's definitely easier when there's no finger pointing, it's still not easy. Some people are almost incapable of admitting fault. This can be very hard on a marriage or in a family. It's not easy working with a person like this either. The underlying reason is that admitting we have been wrong triggers shame. Guilt is, "I've done something bad." Shame is, "I am bad." Shame is one of the most distressing emotions we have. People commit suicide because of shame. We do almost anything to avoid it. But it's also the quick and dirty short-cut for anyone trying to control us. Generations of parents, teachers and coaches have used shame. They do it because it's quick and very effective. Shame will stop a child in his or her tracks. Governments, institutions and the military use shame. When we feel shame we believe we are worthless and undeserving of love. We look for a hole to crawl into and hide. We stop fighting to survive and turn against ourselves.

The truth of Christ's love liberates us from shame. Jesus came to take away our shame and to free us from it. The good news of the gospel is that God loved us so much God sent God's only son that we might not perish but have eternal life. God loves us so much that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not the past, not the future, not height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation. We can be wrong . . . we can fail . . . without shame. Christian humility is not a state of self-despising misery. Christian humility is a state of grace knowing that we are totally loved even and especially when we screw up.

If shame is removed from the picture, then I can admit that I fail sometimes and dare to ask God for help. God can remove my shortcomings and defects of character, what used to be quaintly referred to as "besetting sins," those chronic flaws that lead us to defeat again and again. Once the Holy Spirit lives in us God will even clean house if we let God, emptying dusty and dirty

rooms we had long forgotten were there. During this current season in our lives many white people are discovering hidden racism stuffed away in a corner of their attic, teachings and attitudes passed on to us in childhood, covered over, but still somehow there and needing to be recognized and thrown out. We may have other prejudices and fears that we've held onto. We could have trouble being rigorously honest with ourselves, or admitting when we are wrong because of pride. Some people struggle with inappropriate desires. I'm going to be PG here because there are kids in the room. Whatever it is, whatever we keep losing out to, we don't have to fail anymore. Jesus Christ came to deliver us from the penalty of sin and the power of sin.

God loves me whether I'm right or wrong, and God will give me all the grace I need to change in the right direction. Every mistake I have ever made will not be branded onto my forehead if I admit to them. It will not mark me forever. It will wash right off, because Christ died for me. I do not have to be my own worst enemy anymore. When the internal struggle happens, we can all turn to the God who loves us unconditionally, and ask for help. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Genesis 4:6-7

**6** Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? **7** If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

Romans 7:15-25

**15** I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. **16** And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. **17** As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. **18** For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. **19** For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. **20** Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. **21** So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. **22** For in my inner being I delight in God's law; **23** but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. **24** What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? **25** Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.