

Week 5: Romans 7:15-25a

Last week we saw Paul describe sin as actions that make us guilty before God (1:18-5:11) and then as a power that reigns over the world and forces us to sin (5:12-7:6). If those were not bad enough, there is one more angle with which he explores the pernicious nature of sin. In 7:7-8:39 he describes sin as something that lives within us. It is not just out there creating structures and systems that we have to participate in to live, it is within us urging us to do what we know is wrong and yet cannot resist. While this seems like a hopeless plight, Paul argues that the death and resurrection of Christ make the intimate presence of the Spirit available to believers. The Spirit enables us to live for God in ways we could not before it came. The Spirit even helps us know what we should pray for (8:26-27). The good news is that God strengthens us to live in ways that please God and make our lives fuller. As with other end-time blessings, we do not yet fully live in the presence of God but the coming of the Spirit promises that as our final destiny. So we continue to struggle with discerning the will of God and with doing it once we discern it.

If we were to ask members of our congregations if God wants us to help the needy and be sure that all children have safe and sufficient provisions, they would say, “of course.” But our choices are not as easy as either helping others or not. The difficulties are ever evident in our political decisions and ideologies. Devising policies that offer aid while also assuring and building the dignity of all is a business we have not perfected—or even come close to. The good that we want to do is always tainted by the sin that lies within. If we have the ideal of not allowing self-interest to interfere with creating a just society, we have never achieved it. We presently live in times when taming self-interest is not even a value for many.

As Paul says here in Romans, sin has a way of leading us to act in ways that we know oppose the will of God. Sin is good at producing reasons that make us feel comfortable with the choices it leads us to. After all the sin lives in us; it is one of those voices of “reason” that moves us to accept some ways of ignoring the needs of others and promoting our own good. Paul says there is a war going on within our very selves. It is a war that only God can help us win.

Sin knows how to take advantage of fear and insecurity. It can push us from the shock and fear that terrorist acts evoke to prejudice and refusal to see the image of God in others. It will lead us to distrust and denigrate those “others” who are in the same religion or ethnic group as the perpetrators. Only sin could lead from mourning over violence done to innocent people in our group and our nation to refusing to help hungry and ill-housed children of “them” who are stuck in refugee camps. Only sin could convince good people that having irresponsible or addicted parents should mean that their children go hungry when we reduce the food available to them. Only sin could convince God’s people that the wealthy should pay less because they have earned it, while the less fortunate live in conditions we know are demeaning.

As Paul looks at the human condition, he does not allow the comfortable adage that says all of us want what is best for others, we just think there are different ways to accomplish it. He knows that sin dwells within and that it becomes stronger when we feel threatened, whether we perceive that threat to be to our privilege or to our bodies. Those in our churches who have spoken words of anger about those they see as threatening and who have supported policies that they think will play into their own self-interest are fighting the battle we all face. It is the battle between what we know God wants and the sin that lies within. We are all held captive, sometimes some of us more than others. When some of us are blinded by the sin within, others of us must show love in pointing the way to God’s fuller will. It is not that God’s will is always on the side of one political party or another. No political party has ever rid itself of self-interest to such an extent that it reflects God’s justice and love. We all work with that inner power of sin diverting us from God’s full will. The church must be in the business of holding up the good that God wants and exposing the sin that so easily takes us captive.

As we struggle with doing the good that we know, we can rejoice in the promise that God has sent the Spirit into our hearts to help. We may not get it just right, but neither are we left abandoned in the hands of sin. This can give us the confidence to proclaim the values of the Kingdom of God and to work to lead others to think about how those values can (and how they cannot) be manifested in our world.