

“simil Justus et peccator”

Sermon, July 3, 2011

Rev. Kathie S. Pownall

If I asked you to recite words from Psalm 23, could you do it? What about John 3:16? How about I Corinthians 13? What about Romans Chapter 7? Maybe now that you heard it you could, right?

Romans 7 has no stories about Jesus or none about its author Paul. And yet it contains fundamental ideas about Christ, who is the mind and heart and incarnation of God. It captures the essence of truth about our human nature.

Who was this author Paul who had such insightful thoughts? At the time of this writing he was approximately 55-65 years old, a mature Christian - a man who prayed fervently, who worked mighty miracles, and who wrote numerous letters to the churches. He spoke courageously before governments, kings, and rulers and was tossed into prison, beaten and stoned.

And from all of these experiences we find Paul at the high point of his Christian ministry, at the top of his game – of his A game as you golfers would say, proclaiming, *“I don’t get it. I do not get it. I do the things that I hate. And the very things that I want to do, I don’t do. That which I don’t want to do, I do. What is wrong with me? What a wretched person I am.”*

I imagine that we can each identify with those words. *“I do not understand my own actions because I do not do what I want to. But I do the very thing that I hate.”*

In other words: I don’t do what I know I should!

Pogo the comic strip character said, *“We have met the enemy and the enemy is us.”* The source of that quote is in a book *“The Best of Pogo,”* edited by Mrs. Walt Kelly and Bill Crouch Jr. Here is the Pogo author’s explanation of the phrase:

“In the time of Joseph McCarthyism, celebrated in the Pogo strip there was a character named Simple J. Malarkey. We attempted to explain that each individual is wholly involved in the democratic process, work at it or not. The results of the process fall on the head of the public and he who procrastinates in raising his voice can blame no one but himself. ‘ There is no need to sally forth, for it remains true that those things which make us human are, curiously enough, always close at hand. Resolve, then, that on this very ground, with small flags waving and tiny blasts of tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy and not only may he be ours, he may be us.’

As years passed, the final paragraph was reduced to "We have met the enemy and he is us, ' in a few Pogo strips having to do with pollution. The nine words form the title and theme of a Pogo motion picture, believing that we are all of us responsible for our myriad pollutions, public, private and political."

Another writer said that we have a civil war going on inside us – not a war between two different nations but a war within our inner person.

Writer and author Victor Hugo, who wrote that famous story called *Les Miserables*, was supposed to write every morning but something would get inside of him and get in the way. He would walk the roads, work in the garden, putter around the house, but do anything other than write which he was supposed to do.

So he asked his servant to take away his clothes every night, so he would be forced to stay in his room in the morning and write. We may laugh but I think we all understand how true it is of us.

Sometimes we have a hard time doing what we want, or ought to do.

This week I read that Jimmy Carter and his wife just celebrated their 71st wedding anniversary. Known as a Baptist Bible Belt teacher Carter found himself pictured on the cover of TIME magazine in May, 1971, because he confessed that he still had feelings of lust, even though he was happily married.

Sometimes we have a hard time doing what we want, or ought to do. We could each tell similar stories about ourselves.

As a pastor I am expected to provide spiritual guidance to others. Consequently, I need to work on my own spirituality. I would have a disciplined spiritual practice – whether it involves praying, meditating, journaling, reading scripture and other inspirational writing, etc. Do I do that? I won't give you an answer. Let's just say that at night I fall asleep and in the morning my feet hit the floor while my mind is already racing around and busy about the day ahead. I want to do what is right, but it is hard for me.

Here are some examples you might identify with:

You are in conversation with one or more close acquaintances and the opportunity arises to tell a "tale" about someone else. You hear the words, *"I probably shouldn't say this, but do you know that...?"*

People in the south may try to get away with this by adding ‘*Bless his/her heart*’ to the tale, e.g. “*She’s really put on weight recently, bless her heart; or he’s really been in a bad mood recently, bless his heart.*”

Bless your heart or not, we all recognize the patterns within us as God’s children. When the Bible says, “*that which I want to do, I do not do, and that which I don’t want to do, is precisely what I end up doing.*”

The point of this sermon is to help you recognize that one of the marks of a *mature* Christian is having the “awareness” of this struggle with evil in life. To me, personally, the words *evil* or *sin* mean “those actions of our lives that separate us from a full relationship with God.”

Paul was writing about having an honest awareness about who we are and about the internal battles within us. He suggests that the “mature” Christian knows that this struggle will continue till the end of our lives. As people of faith we live in a real world and need to have a truthful attentiveness of ourselves.

According to the web site **Around the Word – Theology for the Curious Christian** one of the top five phrases that every Lutheran should know is a Latin phrase meaning [simultaneously just/righteous and/sinner] - saint and sinner at the same time] - “*simul Justus et peccator.*” This phrase is not saying that we are a dichotomy, which means we sometimes act like sinners and other times we act like saints, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Nor does it mean that we are partially sinners and partially saints. Don’t think of this phrase in moral terms, that is, sometimes I am a good person and sometimes I am a bad person since I am a mix of both.

What this phrase implies, and it was one of Martin Luther’s most favorite, is **AT THE SAME TIME** we are 100% both. Believing in the grace of God we daily have to fight against doing those things we know we are not supposed to do. Romans 7 is popular because it captures that essence of truth about us – our human nature.

We are Paul. Paul is us.

While being both saint and sinner we come to terms with our inability to bring about the good and right that we desire, and we can become more open to hearing the good news of the gospel and we can navigate through with Verse 25 - the good news, “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*”

This transition verse sets the stage for Chapter 8 where Paul talks about the power and strength of the Holy Spirit

Next week Sister Barbara Brown is giving the sermon and she has chosen Romans 8. Stay tuned. It is one of the finest chapters in the Bible.

But for today, we are to remain in our awareness of *simul Justus et peccator.*” We are both saints and sinners. We will struggle with inner conflicts until we breath no more. That’s just the way it is.

Simple minded folk might say, *“Tomorrow, I am going to start again. It will be the first day of the rest of my life. I will get out of bed, get on my knees and pray, light the candle, and open God’s word and read for inspiration and guidance. I will then proceed to not speak unkindly of anyone and I will not eat ice cream any more. “*

But reality is that we will wake up with the same old familiar struggles *but* with the hope to remember to ask for the spirits’ guidance to go to battle.

Let us pray: *“Gracious and merciful God, we pray for the life giving, death defeating action of you Holy Spirit in our lives. We know what is good and right and yet we struggle with doing what is good and right – for ourselves and for the people we love most. Open us up more fully today to the good news that through the Holy Spirit you can also bring about a wholeness in our lives that comes from no one else.”*
AMEN.