

Proper 9A
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:25-30

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There are times when Paul's letters make my brain hurt. Today's reading is one of those times. When I encounter passages like this, I often start looking at different translations to help make sense of it all. The New Century Version of the Bible, titles this section of Romans as "The War Within Us". Why couldn't Paul just write that rather than all those long-winded sentences?

He could have made it much simpler by writing, "I do not understand my own actions. There is a war within me. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Boiled down even simpler- it is hard to be good. The phrase, "The devil made me do it," is another shortened version of this portion of Paul's letter to the Romans. The actions that Paul is referring to are those things that go against Christ's commandments of unconditional love. Certainly, this includes those sinful actions that will land you in jail, but by and large, he is referring to the sins of our day-to-day doings and dealings. The way we treat people and all of creation defines us. Our words and actions have the power to do good or to harm.

When I was growing up, there was a pond situated above the green belt of our community. Following periods of heavy rain, the pond would overflow creating a small river of rushing pond water flowing down the hill and through the green belt. One Saturday when the overflow was in full force, I went to collect my best friend to go splashing through the muddy "river". She opened the door dressed in white shorts and a light-colored shirt. "You can't play today," I said. She replied with a sly grin, "I just can't get dirty. We don't leave for an hour. Let's go!" And she dashed out of her house.

Behind her house, there was an area that always created a small pool before the water flowed on. Next thing I knew she was wading the in water. I reminded her she wasn't supposed to get dirty. "Come on," she tempted as she plopped down into the water, "We will tell my mom that your brother pushed us in so I won't get in trouble." She silently dared me to join her as her now not-so-white shorts began to balloon out in the water. I'm not proud to say I lost my internal battle to do the right thing and walk away. To cover my friend, I lied to her mother and got my brother in trouble. The next day, I came clean to mom. Then I had to apologize to my brother, go tell my friend's mom that I lied and that it was all her daughter's idea, and found myself grounded for several weeks.

There was a war within me that day between what was right and what was easy, between what I should do and what I wanted to do. We all face these types of battles, regardless of our age, because Sin with a capital “S” is a power that is ever present in our lives. When faced with a conflict between doing what is right and doing what we want to do even though we know we shouldn’t, Sin dares us to do the things we know we shouldn’t do. Sin can also make us overly zealous to do right to the point where our zeal becomes sinful as it harms and persecutes others. Paul experienced this firsthand before his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Paul writes to the Romans, “I do not understand my own actions.” I suspect most of us have had this thought at one time or another. Times when the question sitting at the forefront of our brain is, “What was I thinking?” Usually, the answer to this question is that we were thinking only of ourselves and what we wanted rather than considering others. Or our sights were set on what our family, friends, and even our culture tell us is right, rather than on what Jesus would have us do.

Comedy movies often depict this ‘war within’ as a devil sitting on one shoulder while an angel sits on the other as they yammer back and forth trying to sway the person between to their side. In the Disney movie *The Emperor’s New Groove* the shoulder devil says of the angel, “Don’t listen to that guy. He’s trying to lead you down the path of righteousness. I’m gonna lead you down the path that rocks.” Sin is a slippery character making what is wrong seem right, fun, or even exciting.

This war within us can get us twisted up inside. It adds one more burden to the many that we carry each day. At times we may feel completely overwhelmed with the choices and decisions we must make. It can cause us to feel lost, unsure of the path we should follow, as we wonder who can rescue us.

The answer, as Paul tells us, is Jesus Christ our Lord. In all our struggles, Jesus is right there beside us helping us to carry the load. He calls to us, “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...”

In Jesus’ time, the imagery of a yoke would have been easily understood as it was a common farm implement used to connect two animals together to pull something. But for most of us, we only know about yokes from a book. We have no practical experience of them. A properly made yoke neither chafes nor rubs. It allows the two to work in sync so that neither bears the full load all the time.

Jesus’ yoke is his commandment to love unconditionally. It connects us to Christ, binds us together, making something completely new. This yoke is gentle, giving us a benchmark by which we can navigate our way through life.

On the front of my car, I have a St. Michael’s license plate. I have found that it makes me a better and more courteous driver. When I wear my one of my St. Michael’s shirts or my clerical collar in public, I am more tolerant of things that would normally drive me crazy and more aware of my own actions and the world around me. These things don’t happen because I am thinking “What Would Jesus Do?”. They happen because these things remind me that what I do is a reflection of Christ. They are a form of the yoke to which Jesus refers. It is much easier to do

good when you imagine Jesus is sitting in your passenger seat or walking beside you as you go through your day.

It is hard to be good, but letting Christ's yoke settle onto our shoulders makes it easier. Knowing that Christ is beside us helps us choose the path that equates with unconditional love. That doesn't necessarily mean the path itself will be easier. In fact, it usually isn't. Living the way of love is hard work, but it is work that leaves us with a good tiredness. A feeling of joy in a choice well-made or a job well done. A sensation of wholeness and completeness.

Jesus comes to us humble and gentle, offering us rest for our weary souls. Asking, not forcing, us to come, to take his yoke upon us. For when we do, we are no longer alone. Christ's yoke lifts us up as he shares the load of our burdens, our pain, and our struggles. In Jesus Christ we find companionship and solace on a totally awesome journey of unconditional love.

Works Cited

The Emperor's New Groove. Dir. Mark Dindal. Disney. 2000. Animated Movie.