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First Congregational Church of Blue Hill
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Hitting the Mark

Faith awakens in us the ability to overcome sin and to pursue the good

Our scripture text this week comes from the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans. Romans is unique among the letters we have from Paul in that it's the only letter of his in which he's writing to a church that he himself did not establish. He's sending this letter before him, to the church in Rome, as a sort of calling card. In the brief passage we read this morning, he explains his struggles with sin and how faith has awakened in him the ability to pursue the good. I think it offers a lesson to us in how to listen to, and act on, God's voice in our lives.

Let's listen to his words, inspired by a deep appreciation of God's grace:

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that, when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:15-25a)

This is a remarkable meditation, isn't it? It gets really complex in the middle there, but it starts out simply enough:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

I was struck when I saw that this passage from Romans was the lectionary text for this Sunday. It hit me so hard when I first read it: "I do not understand my own actions." I've often had that thought; in fact, I can remember confessing that very thing to my kids. I know that sometimes I'm a mystery to them in the way I react, but the larger truth is that sometimes I'm also a mystery to myself! I get frustrated

over small things; I hold onto anger; I don't keep my commitments. If I stop and pull up for a moment, I know that I'm being silly or small, but I just don't seem to be able to rise above it all on my own, all the time. It's not something I'm proud of.

Does that feeling resonate with you? Do you share Paul's frustration—why do I *do* the things I don't want to do, and I *don't* do the things I want? Very often, we *know* right from wrong, but it is so hard for us to *act* on that knowledge. To summon the courage to act on that knowledge. This paradox is so widely understood now that we've even given it a name—we call it “the human condition.”

Even so, Paul is doing an unusually brave thing in this letter that he's sending, which in the custom of the day will be read aloud to roomfuls of people he's never met. He is in effect introducing himself to them by confessing, by broadcasting, his ongoing struggle with sin. If you know one thing about him from this letter, you know that he struggles with sin. He repeats that twice in this passage, word for word: “If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.” Sin is real and vital to Paul.

This is a remarkable admission coming from Saint Paul the Evangelist! Paul reports that he didn't have a day's struggle with sin until he saw the light on the road to Damascus, but it turns out that that was just the beginning of his struggles! Apparently, he goes through this struggle with sin every day, multiple times a day, just like us. Not the one-and-done he would have liked, or that we might have expected of a saint.

Now he does have a purpose in revealing his own fallibility, his own humanity, to them. He's hoping to soften the members of the church up a bit so that their ears will be open to his plea for unity in their church. The church in Rome was composed of two competing factions: Jews who had converted to Christianity but who still followed Torah law; and Gentiles, who never had followed that law and didn't want to start now. One of Paul's goals in making this trip was to lift both factions up to the larger truth of the Christian gospel—that God loved, and welcomed, everyone equally. In squabbling with each other over who came first, they were breaking God's law of love, as expressed in Christ's death and resurrection. They were sinning against each other, and therefore they were sinning against God. It's very easy to fall into.

We don't talk about sin much in our culture; it's a really complicated concept that's hard to pin down precisely. There are the big sins—murder, adultery, Ten Commandments stuff—and there are also the small everyday sins where we fail to

follow our conscience, to do what we know is right. (Slaid Cleaves: “It’s the little sins that wear your soul away.”) I think that’s the meaning that Paul wants to draw out. There’s a word in Hebrew that describes this understanding of sin, *hattat*, [“het-TATH”]; it means “falling short of the mark.” Breaking God’s law of love, failing to love others as much as we love ourselves.

In the passage from Exodus that Gina just read, the Hebrew midwives were in precisely this jam. The safest thing to do would have been to follow Pharaoh’s orders, but we’re told that Shiphrah and Puah feared God and so they conspired against Pharaoh—took a huge risk—because in their hearts they knew what was right, and it took all of their courage and ingenuity to follow God’s law of love, and not Pharaoh’s orders.

So if the struggle with sin is our problem, the human problem, how can we ever hit the mark? How can we move beyond *knowing* what is good to *doing* what is good? Here, Paul offers some guidance: He writes, “Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.” He doesn’t throw out Torah law altogether; he says that it is useful in helping us to understand right from wrong, but it doesn’t create the *ability* to do the good. The law brings knowledge of sin but not the ability to overcome it. On its own it’s not enough. That ability to conquer sin, to rise above it, comes from following a higher law, the law of love, reaching out to God in our struggling moments for help and guidance. Faith awakens in us the ability to overcome sin and to pursue the good.

Paul underscores this point in the way he ends this passage, with one of his most memorable and heartfelt sentiments: “Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” And his answer?: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

This is *our* rescue, *our* salvation, as well: We are able to break free from the law of sin that ties us down by fixing our minds on God’s law in our hardest moments. You might have heard the West Point cadet prayer: they pray for God’s help as leaders so that they might choose “the harder right over the easier wrong.”

That’s a really good way of paraphrasing Paul’s lesson for us. Where do we turn when we’re looking for the strength to choose the harder right over the easier wrong? This dilemma comes up all the time in my teaching on leadership, and our students at HBS are hungry for guidance here. How do the best business leaders set and achieve a high moral standard for themselves and their firms? How do you stick to your principles in a world that offers so many shortcuts, so many opportunities to profit at the expense of others?

This is the reason that my colleagues and I at Harvard created the course that we call *The Spiritual Lives of Leaders*, work that feels very much like a ministry to this rising generation. The students need role models to help them see how faith and spirituality can guide them in making their toughest decisions, when the temptation to cut corners is strongest.

To help them in this discernment process, we put our students into conversation with a set of truly exemplary, accomplished leaders who come to class to share their own experiences in setting this higher standard—to go beyond what’s merely required by their shareholders to widen out and serve all of the constituencies to which they are responsible. What’s notable is that the leaders who come to campus for these visits are invariably rooted in some faith tradition, or in a deep sense of spirituality, often one that they have cultivated within themselves from their childhood. This grounding leads them to understand that the world is much bigger than their firms, and that they have allegiances much deeper than the next month’s profit.

As an example of this ambition, one of the leaders who came to speak with our students shared a personal philosophy that he uses to guide his company: “Everyone is someone’s precious child.” It might as well be engraved over the door. It’s a touchstone that guides all of his company’s decisions around its workforce—the easy ones, like hiring and promotion; and the harder ones, like restructuring and managing in a downturn. He was inspired by his faith to treat his employees this way, but what really brought it home for him was when he read the results of a national survey that reported that 88% of employees feel they work for an organization that doesn’t care about them. Can you imagine that? Talk about falling short of the mark!

Many of my students have expressed how much they want to understand how faith can guide them to bold action like this, and to give voice to their deepest values. One student took me aside after class one day; she said, “I want a support system that supports me when I am weak. Faith and spirituality are wells I can draw upon to build strong purpose and set about the work of repairing the world.”

This student’s desire to draw on faith and spirituality as wells of strength to work to repair the world sounds an awful lot like the work we are engaged in here in Blue Hill, as we begin to dream of the ministry we can afford to define and to fund, with proceeds from the sale of the parsonage.

Bill, you asked in the quarterly meeting how we might do something that would surprise the people of Blue Hill and across the peninsula. Do I have that right? That is a great question.

We have a homeless problem, we are living in the midst of a drug abuse epidemic, we really began to dig into the root causes of these problems last week with Tracey Hair from H.O.M.E. Tracey alerted us to the sins that are being visited upon the homeless, and in particular upon our most vulnerable LGBT youth, sometimes in the very name of religion. How do we inject God's saving grace into these situations? How do we look at these people, not through the lens of the law, but rather through an enlarged sense of responsibility, through a lens of love? How might we support Tracey as she goes to Augusta to lobby lawmakers, to encourage them to look beyond the laws that are currently on the books and to pass new legislation that hits a higher mark, that reflects God's grace to the homeless among us?

As a proud and inclusive town church, we don't typically lead with our faith, but we certainly lean on it, you can be sure of that. Pastor Lisa and the trustees will lead us in discernment as we find the Traceys in our midst and use our resources to strengthen in them and in ourselves the ability to pursue the good. We are inheritors of a magnificent gift, that can empower change and redemption. That can cause people to aspire to be their best selves. We can be agents of God's grace in Blue Hill, across the peninsula, and in the world if we remember and act on this heritage gift to us.