

**Year A: Proper 9b Gen 24:34-67; Ps 45:11-18; Rom 7:15-25a; Mt 11:16-19, 25-30
St. Barnabas, Florissant – July 5, 2020**

Focus Sentence: “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24b-25a)

SERMON

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....

Today’s second reading, from Romans, is considered by some biblical scholars to be evidence (along with a few other passages) that Paul was a repressed gay man. Paul certainly makes it clear that he struggled mightily to do what he saw as right, and yet found himself doing wrong. Whether this struggle involved his sexual orientation or not isn’t really important, because I believe that we can all relate to the struggle Paul describes, each of us in our own way.

PAUSE

I believe that many of us have come to realize that there’s often a HUGE gap between *knowing* what’s good and having the ability to *act* on that knowing. Someone once referred to this gap as the “Knowing Better Syndrome.” And I’d bet that each and every one of us can relate to this syndrome in a very personal way. Listen to the following statements, and see if you’ve ever said or thought one or more of them:

“I’m going on a diet right after my vacation for sure.”

“From now on, I’m going to slow down and enjoy life more.”

“This is absolutely my last drink!”

“No matter how much they beg, I’m going to say ‘no’ this time.”

“OK, I’ll help you out this one last time --- but this is it for sure.”

PAUSE

No matter what the circumstances in our individual lives may be, each one of us has, in one way or another struggled with these realities of human living. The “Knowing Better Syndrome” can be defined as the fact that, even when we KNOW that something is absolutely right and good --- DOING what is absolutely right and good often lies beyond our ability to accomplish it.

One of the major themes in today’s reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans is this very struggle between knowing and doing. Paul says clearly that he *believes* the law of God, most clearly expressed in the Ten Commandments, is a *good thing*. He goes so far as to say that he DELIGHTS in the law of God! And yet, he finds himself unable to live his life 100% in accordance with that law. Knowing and doing are simply worlds apart.

PAUSE

There’s another, slightly different, angle to this text. Paul seems somewhat *baffled* by his inner struggle. I suspect that we can relate to Paul, and his bafflement, when we find ourselves saying things like, “I really don’t know why I did that!” or “I don’t understand myself sometimes.” Or even, “The devil made me do that.”

PAUSE

One of the clearest examples of this baffling struggle is when people fight against addictions of various kinds, whether drugs or alcohol or gambling or even workaholism. I mean, has there ever been anyone who wanted their children to *start* smoking? I have first-hand experience with the struggle to quit smoking, to really *want* to quit smoking, but getting the job done was *really* tough. You go through things like, “I want to stop.... I *know* it’s the right thing to stop.” And Paul expresses this struggle with something like this: “I know what’s good, and I want to do what’s good.....yet something in me compels me to do what’s wrong.....there’s a war going on inside me.”

Paul goes on to affirm that deep within himself, he really wants to live the way God wants him to live, but his “flesh”, his earthly self, is in bondage to sin. Paul’s problem is your problem, and my problem. It’s one of the basic facts of the human condition --- we’re conflicted, and the classic struggle between what’s good and what’s wrong isn’t simply an abstract intellectual debate. It’s an inner, personal struggle, a war going on inside of us.

PAUSE

That might seem pretty discouraging, and it seems yet more discouraging to realize that even one of the giants of the Christian faith, like St. Paul, was frustrated by the “Knowing Better Syndrome.”

I guess that we too could cry out, as Paul does, “Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

PAUSE

Well, sisters and brothers, we do have someone to rescue us, and that someone is, as Paul continues, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” And, so, just how *does* Jesus rescue us?

I think today’s Gospel reading puts it very well. Up until this point in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has been teaching the disciples, and us, about the COSTS of discipleship, the not-always-so-pleasant consequences that happen to us *because* we’re followers of Jesus. But, in this morning’s passage, Jesus offers the promise of the *gentleness* of his call to us. The difficulty of following God’s law, the frustrations of the “Knowing Better Syndrome” are made much easier simply *because* Jesus is WITH US in the struggle.

PAUSE

The Jews called the Law of God, the *Torah*, a YOKE, a device to guide them, and to keep them on the right path, but also thought of it as a frustrating yoke.

Jesus is coming to us to tell us that HIS yoke is easy, and that HIS burden is light. And, Jesus tells us that there are only four things we have to do:

#1 is “something to do.” *What* is it that we’re to do? “Come,” Jesus tells us. Change your direction --- from where you were headed before Jesus called you to where Jesus is now. Henri Nouwen said that the Gospel in a nutshell is God in Jesus saying to the world: “Come close.” But this calling to us “to do” is always TO a “*Someone*” --- not to something, or somewhere.

#2 is “something to leave.” What we’re to leave with Jesus is, of course, *our* burden. With a radical, childlike trust in the God Jesus reveals to us, the disciple can lay down the burden of “control,” of having to “be God.” One of the startling things you may have noticed in the Gospels is that Jesus never hurried. He never fretted about what to eat or what to drink or what to wear; because to fret, in light of the God Jesus proclaims, is to act like a Gentile, a non-believer. The burden of “outcomes” for the disciple of Jesus, is to be left behind. Worry, as Jesus tells us elsewhere, is useless.

#3 is “something to take.” What the disciple is to take up, take on, is the “yoke” of God’s unconditional love. In Jewish tradition, the “yoke” represents “obedience.” The rabbis spoke about the “yoke of the *Torah*.” And when Jesus speaks of “my yoke,” he’s referring to doing the will of Abba in heaven: the will of complete love. While not a life of “EASE,” this “easy yoke” is actually rest-producing, because there’s nothing we can do to earn it --- or to lose it. It’s the pure grace-gift of God that can only be freely received, and, in turn, freely given. This “yoke” is for us the “service of perfect freedom,” as our *Prayer Book* puts it.

Finally, **#4 is “something to find.”** For Matthew especially, “to learn” is an important aspect of discipleship. At the heart of this learning is to find the “true Sabbath,” or “true rest” for the soul. The more we learn from Jesus, the less we are controlled by the passion to possess. As we’re grounded more and more in God’s unconditional love for us, the compulsive need to be “better than” loosens its grip on us. The strained, hurried --- almost breathless --- rush to have more and to do more seems to fade in importance. What we had once thought to be critically self-important, now we can look at with a detachment bordering on laughter. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “To fix one’s eye solely on the simple truth of God, at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted, and turned upside-down, is to be simple.” At rest, we might add. And free of the “Knowing Better Syndrome.”

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

AMEN.