

AND JUSTICE FOR ALL
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Romans 7:15-25a, *Newquist *Incarnational Translation*

Dear friends on the journey,

I just can't seem to get it right.

Can you relate?

The thing I emphatically do not want to do is exactly what I end up doing. I hate it! It doesn't seem to matter how much I learn about right and wrong. About good and evil. About what leads to health and wholeness versus what leads to death and despair. All this "book learning" goes to pot when it comes to actually doing what I know I should be doing. And *not* doing what I know I should *not* be doing.

I love that we have all kinds of really good principles to guide our life together at SPC. Values of hospitality and spirituality and compassion that teach us to love God and neighbor. Even if I act against those values, they are still really good ones.

But the truth is, I don't even know sometimes when I am acting against those values. Other people can see how much I fall short, but I can't. It's like I have unintentional blinders on. And sometimes it's even worse than that. Sometimes I *can* tell that I am not living up to my values, but I just can't stop! It's like some evil force has taken over me, and I can't control myself anymore.

The truth is, I'm a hot mess.

I can decide over and over again: this time I will get it right! And over and over again, I still get it wrong! And when I say "get it wrong," I am talking full on Dumpster Fire. Even if my intentions are harmless, the impact of my actions can actually perpetuate evil. Yes: EVIL! Violence, oppression, domination. You name it. The hard truth is that even when I want to do the right thing, even when I think I AM doing the right thing, devastating consequences lie close at hand. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Honestly, sometimes I literally feel possessed. Like there is a war going on within me over which I have no control. I don't even know how to keep going sometimes.

Only through the grace of God can I walk in the way of Jesus. And for that, I am grateful.

With love,
Pastor Gusti

**"Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places" (Cosgrove and Edgerton, In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching, 62).*

Imagine with me this morning that a former Southern Baptist, a lifelong Presbyterian, and a budding young feminist walk into a bar.

The conversation turns to the issue of sin.

Is it a sin to drink a beer? the former Southern Baptist asks, with fear and trepidation and a craving for a Corona. To which the lifelong Presbyterian emphatically responds, while gulping down his second Bud Lite in as many minutes, Uh ... no!

The budding young feminist, sipping her virgin margarita – by choice, of course, and *not* by dogma! – rolls her eyes and launches her retort:

All this talk about sin, she declares, is a misogynistic tool of the hetero-patriarchy designed to blame women for the fall of humanity.

The men lower their eyes, hiding behind their beers.

The truth is, the budding feminist flippantly continues, I do not think I even believe in sin.

The lowered eyes get wider. Gaping mouths still hide behind the beers.

The former Southern Baptist finally breaks the silence, with the deepest most heavily accented hellfire and brimstone stance he can muster, and mumbles:

“Well ... sin believes in you!”

And they all bust out laughing. And continue the conversation. And the friendship, for many years to come.

Sin believes in you, he said. To me, of course: the budding young feminist all those years ago. And he was right.

Hetero-patriarchal misogyny aside, the truth is, I just cannot seem to get it right. This thing called life, I mean. “Life Abundant,” I mean, in the language of Jesus. Even when I know in the pit of my soul I am a beautiful Beloved Child of God. I just. can’t. seem. to get. it. right!

And neither ... I am guessing ... can you.

Neither can the Apostle Paul, upon whose letter to the Romans – and the particular section of that letter that is before us today – the Presbyterian doctrine of sin is historically most dependent.

I do not understand my own actions, Paul writes, in the first century translation of this letter. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. In fact, Paul continues, I am so messed up that it is no longer even I that is doing this thing that I hate. There is an inner war going on inside me, Paul laments. Holding me captive to sin, which seems to dwell within me almost as deep as the steadfast love of God to which I cling.

Hamartia is the word in the Greek for sin: “a fatal flaw,” according to the dictionary definition, “leading to the downfall of a tragic hero or heroine.”

And “fatal flaw” is right.

Not so much in the subtle sense of whether or not it is okay to drink a beer. (Or lie to your wife about how beautiful she looks in that dress, when she clearly does not!) But in the more dramatic sense of whether or not our tax dollars pay for a racist criminal justice system. Or whether or not “The Land of the Free” maintains its

treaty obligations with Native American tribes. Or whether or not *homo sapiens* is inherently unable to inhabit this planet without completely destroying it.

The truth is, we who are human ARE fatally flawed. "Sin," with a Capital S, in all its Self-Inflicted-Nonsense, DOES believe in us. Even when we espouse the most commendable values. Even if we are one of "the good guys," doing everything we can to live as God's Beloved Community, on earth as it is in heaven.

Which, I believe, we are!

The truth is, as we shared in our Teach the Preacher conversation this week, we would be lost without the grace of God.

Which is where humility comes in.

Humility: "a freedom from pride or arrogance," as the dictionary says. An admission, in every part of our lives, that we really are just humans from the humus, as we are shown in those early chapters of the book of Genesis. And to the earth we shall return.

Humility: a confession that we are emphatically flawed and fallible, even as we are incredibly beloved and beautiful.

Which brings us to the Fourth of July. And the American Revolution, also known by historians as "The Presbyterian Rebellion." And the promise of America, the Beautiful, these 244 years later. As we finally face, with utter honesty, the horror our way of life has wrought on too many for too long.

The truth is, as that budding young feminist so many years ago understands, the well-intentioned arrogance of our national ethos, throwing off the yoke of oppression, IS a point of pride: we DO want to believe this Land of Liberty DID achieve equality under the law – with Presbyterian backing! We do want to declare, as our Presbyterian heritage affirms, that we are "created equal ... [and] endowed by our Creator with ... unalienable Rights." And we want to celebrate that!

But the truth is, as that former Southern Baptist rightly concluded, Sin (with a capital S) believes in our nation, too. As it believes in all nations. Because our Sinful human tendency toward tyranny and idolatry corrupts even the best intentions of government by the consent of the governed.

Which brings us to the lifelong Presbyterian at the bar, all those years ago, who really did have something to say. Once he could get a word in edgewise between the budding young feminist standing her ground and the former Southern Baptist insisting on sin, the lifelong Presbyterian finally interjected:

"You know what? I think the grace of God believes in us, too."

The grace of God believes in us, too!

The grace. of God. believes in us, too.

And that changes everything.

Grace. Amazing.

Grace believes in us, too! Not as a cop-out for perpetuating injustice. Not as an ace in the hole that costs us nothing. Grace believes in us, too, as a fervent hope! Grace believes in us, too, as an unwavering conviction:

Heartfelt repentance *is still possible!*
Righteous repair is perhaps even inevitable!

Grace believes in us, too, even when our humility costs us everything we have come to hold dear: our cherished idolatries of American exceptionalism and Presbyterian pride. Grace believes in us, too, as we humbly admit our failings and pray for the guidance of the Spirit.

Grace believes in us, too! And keeps chasing after us! And will never, ever, NOT EVER give up on us!

And because grace believes in us, too, through our humble confession of Sin with a capital S, we come to know even more deeply, the steadfast love of God that will *always* lead *all* of us home.

Amen.