

“Burden of Self”

For those of you who were here last Sunday, you may remember that I began my short summary of St. Paul’s passage to the Romans by saying that Paul can be a pain in the neck. Well, I think that holds for this week’s passage too. It is not his message; it is his delivery. Paul does not seem to be able to say anything directly or succinctly. As I also said last week, I think that is because he dictated his letters. He even points out in the Letter to the Galatians, “See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!”¹ Why he dictated his letters is open to conjecture. But his letters ramble, and the logic crosses back and forth like a pretzel.

If we simplify this passage from Romans, perhaps putting it in just a few words, what would you say the meaning of the passage is? [listen for: I do what I don’t want to do.] Very good. Paul is vexed by his own behavior. He cannot seem to synchronize the way he feels he should live with how he lives. He knows that he ought to follow the Law of Moses, that is, the 613 laws or commandments from the Torah. He is trying to live his life by those laws, but he keeps failing. He believes that it is his flesh, his body, that makes him stray.

I think that this dilemma is very human. We want to be our best selves, but we cannot manage it. We want to be self-controlled, yet we get angry. We want to have a healthy diet, but we pig out on desserts. We want to prepare our taxes properly but we don’t declare the income from a side hustle. These may seem to be petty faults. But we commit even bigger ones. Such as gossiping when we do not have the facts. Breaking our marriage vows. Being blind to how our own way of life is responsible for the hardships of others, i.e., child labor in China, the mining of coal or diamonds, which can cause illness or death from cave-ins, people who harvest our foods for little pay, and fast fashion from Asia made in unsafe factories, to name just a few. We blind ourselves to our own failings to keep ourselves comfortable.

Paul says, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.” This is not a law like those in the Torah, but a rule of life. There is a constant struggle to do the right thing. Temptation is everywhere. As Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” I know we like our dichotomies, but I think the flesh is getting the short end of the stick here. If the spirit is so strong, why is it so easy to give in to fleshly desires? I think we are weak on all accounts. Does anyone remember the comedian, Flip Wilson? What was one of his favorite lines when one of his characters misbehaved? “The devil made me do it.” It is easier to blame our flesh or the devil than our spirit, which we think is our essential self.

Thanks to St. Paul and St. Augustine, we have the theology that declares that the body, our flesh, is bad. They both seem to have been vulnerable to carnal temptations. They felt their bodies schemed against their godly intentions even when their inmost self was determined not to give in to temptation. They might also say that there are no small temptations. Giving in on a cookie is the beginning of a slippery slope that leads to perdition. Life is hard.

¹ Galatians 6:11

Paul writes, “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The one who will rescue him from himself is Jesus Christ. He is not alone in his struggles, and neither are we. Jesus walks with us and helps us overcome our untoward desires. I think this nicely segues into the last saying in today’s Gospel.

Just like last week, the Gospel passage from Matthew seems to me to be a collection of unconnected sayings of Jesus. That is, they do not form a sermon or discourse. Each line stands on its own. My favorite of these is the last one we heard. It is also one of the favorite sayings of the Church. Those familiar with the Rite One Eucharistic liturgy know them as part of The Comfortable Words. These are Bible verses that are said by the priest after the absolution and before the peace. There is great comfort in those words.

The verses I am referring to are, “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”²

Even if we do not feel beset by choices between righteousness and sin as Paul did, we may be overcome by life’s work. Each day, we rise to chores, struggles, work, and the everyday tasks of life that wear us out. We can get so worn down by the pattern of life that we become drudges. We end up plodding through life joyless and directionless. Jesus does not want that for us.

We may find those words encouraging and hopeful, but imagine how life-giving they could be to people whose lives were about keeping body and soul together on a daily basis. Lives of poverty that were made even worse by the onerous taxation of the Roman Empire. Jesus offers an alternative that is full of hope. They are not alone in their burdens. Jesus will walk beside them. Indeed, Jesus will yoke himself to them and give them the lighter part of the load. They knew what it was like to have two oxen yoked together to plow a field. Ideally, they were of equal strength and could pull evenly. More often, the stronger one did more of the work. Jesus is saying he will take the heavier load. A yoke is never easy, but he once again goes against the common understanding of what God’s Kingdom is.

Jesus lets us know that life is not all struggle and toil, ending in the grave. There is more, and he is here to give it to us. Allow him to ease your burdens. Allow him to take the heavier portion. He is gentle and humble of heart, not a task master like landowners could be. Christ relieves you of the burdens of sinful actions and of all the burdens of life. Come unto Jesus and find rest for your body, heart, and soul.

² Matthew 11:28-30 KJV I used the KJV translation because of their familiarity.