

Paul's Epistle to the Romans 7:15 – 25a

The Inner Conflict

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 that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 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 that 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 man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

I speak to you in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

In our reading, today, from the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, Paul poses a truly human dilemma. “I know what I am supposed to do- but other things get in the way”.

In saying this, Paul ‘lets it all hang out’, which is not characteristic of him. There is a kind of war going on in him, which has more to do with cosmic forces than it has to do with him. In first century’s terms, it is a war between Sin with a capital ‘S’, which is cosmic; and, the Law of Moses and Roman Law which are also cosmic. All of them are very powerful external forces, which are fully integrated with human life and which clash with each other. The dilemma is what should Paul do with it? How can he handle it in such a way that he does what is good and right, despite himself? At the heart of it is faith in God. His Hebrew culture is saying to him in the golden rule, “do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you”; and, on the other hand, his Roman citizen culture is saying, “You must do what the Roman Empire commands you to do”.

This dilemma is similar to one that we face throughout our life, although, it may not be as weighty as what Paul

faced. It applies to our work, our home life, our relationships, life in our faith-community and our school life. And, there is always guilt associated with it. My 'ego' tells me to do this – but my conscience tells me not to do that.

There is an ancient story from the Sufi branch of Islam which provides a kind of perspective on this type of dilemma, as well as posing a solution to the dilemma.

“Mulla Nasrudin decided to start a flower garden. He prepared the soil and planted the seeds of many beautiful flowers. But when they came up, his garden was filled not just with his chosen flowers but also overrun by dandelions. He sought out advice from gardeners all over and tried every method known to get rid of them but to no avail. Finally, he walked all the way to the capital to speak to the Royal Gardener at the sheik's palace. The wise old man had counseled many gardeners before and suggested a variety of remedies to expel the dandelions but Mulla had tried them all. They sat together in silence for some time and finally the gardener looked at Nasrudin and said, “Well, then I suggest you learn to love them”.

I guess this is another way of saying that if we cannot beat them, then at least we may accept the value that the gifts bring. Perhaps even further, we can see how we can use the dandelions, or the Sin, or the lack of faith in God, as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Paul frequently expresses his desire for spiritual growth. In our own desire for spiritual growth, I am certain that all of us have this constant battle within us. And, it can be a battle that is for something as simple as eating healthy (and denying ourselves those greasy fries), to being honest and compassionate (as opposed to being a downright hard-nosed crook; or, a racist).

It is a struggle for what we call 'spiritual wholeness'. A spirituality that links God-within-us with God and with the world. A struggle to live as God wants us to live – which Jesus calls 'living in the Kingdom of God'. It is a spirituality that demands both prayer and action.

Some people suggest that there has been a tendency in our Christian faith to focus on what we are told to believe and that many have grown tired of a Christianity that can say what it believes on paper but doesn't have anything to show in our lives. But we know that ideologies and doctrines aren't easy things to love! That's why we look to examples of people who have

integrated their faith and action in a spiritual wholeness, people like Francis and Clare of Assisi; and, Mother Theresa, Dr Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. They worked among the rejected and oppressed people in their worlds. They demonstrated the need to unite both prayer and activism. And, closer to our time, we might think of Richard Rohr as having 'spiritual wholeness'. I know some of you are familiar with his writings.

So, while I think, Paul is expressing a human dilemma that we experience just as profoundly, today as he did, – we know that our dilemmas are not based on our innate Sinfulness. While they might be based on the life choices we make, they might also be based on our rejection of God. And, they might also be the result of the cultural influence of our parents or the cultural pressures of our society and peers. Our dilemmas, unlike Paul's are not based on our separation from a God who lives above us in the heavens and chooses from time to time to intervene in human history. We meet God daily, here and now, in our lives

Just as an aside, here is a humorous story of one man's attempt to solve his dilemma between what he wants and what his conscience says.

A man consulted with his physician, "I have a terrible problem," he said. "Lately, I've been carousing and misbehaving. It's been happening more and more frequently, and my conscience is beginning to trouble me very deeply. Can you give me something that will help?"

The doctor replied, "Oh, I see, you want me to give you some-thing to strengthen your willpower?"

"No," the patient protested, "that's not it. I don't want to strengthen my willpower. I want you to give me something to weaken my conscience."

Jesus encourages us to be spiritually whole. One way to do this, I suggest, is that we experiment with withdrawing from business as usual and go into what Jesus calls 'our private room', for prayer and meditation (Matt. 6:6). However, in order for this not to become escapism, we would have to remain quite close to the world at the same time, loving it. The balancing point must be the real world. We need both inner experience for spiritual wholeness; and, some form of outer validation, as well. Jesus says that 'we need to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matt 10:16)

As we see in the Book of Exodus(3:1-6), Moses' experience of the burning bush links prayer and action as the very starting place of the Judeo-Christian tradition. His encounter is surely an inner one, but it quickly drives him outward, as deep inner experiences tend to do. Immediately after Moses has this heart-stopping experience, YHWH or God said to him.: "Go tell Pharaoh to let my people go" (Exodus 3:7,10). Rather than invite Moses to worship or attend a church service, God says, "Go make a difference, Moses!" The fire burned for him, then in him, and finally through him.

Is it this type of fire, burning in us, today? A burning to personally advocate against structural racism; and, the injustice toward different sectors of people in our society

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is another example of spiritual wholeness where inner change leads to outer service of others. In the Twelfth step, alcoholics learn that they will never really come to appropriate the power and importance of the first eleven steps until they personally take it upon themselves to give it away to at least one other person. Regarding this, *Fr. Richard Rohr* writes: "love is like

an electric circuit; it can never flow in just one direction”.

Our spiritual wholeness, which includes our merged practice of inner prayer and outward love is our way of living as God wants us to live. And, this may include embracing the dandelions –even the blackberries - in our garden, which are there forever. The question is how can we use them as an opportunity, as Mulla Nasrudin suggests, rather than see them as a pest? That is the eternal question. Perhaps that is why some use dandelions for wine and for salad; and, blackberry fruit is very tasty.

I am going to end with story, another one about a man, who, like Paul, is battling with a distraction with unanticipated consequences.

There was a man in a small town who bought a bus ticket to Kelowna. He stood and waited and checked his watch. The bus should be arriving soon. So, he wandered about a bit, and his attention was diverted to a large weigh scale, which promised to be able to tell not only one's weight, but one's name and other pertinent information about the person being weighed. Curious, he stepped on it and put a twoonie in the slot. Instantly a slip came out that said, "Your name is Harry Hanson.

You live in Grand Forks, British Columbia. You weigh 85 Kilograms. You are ten Kilos overweight. You are on your way to visit your sister in Kelowna. The bus to Kelowna has been delayed. Have a nice day."

He was surprised and amused, so after a few minutes he stepped on the scale and put in another twoonie. The slip popped out. "Your name is Harry Hanson. You live in Grand Forks, British Columbia. You still weigh 85 Kilograms. You are ten Kilos overweight. You are on your way to visit your sister in Kelowna. The bus to Kelowna has been delayed. Have a nice day."

Certain that this was some kind of a scam, he was determined to fool this machine. Quickly he walked across the street to a variety store. He bought a pair of Groucho Marx glasses with the exaggerated nose and the mustache and eyebrows. He also bought a black hat and a cane. With this disguise in place, and walking with a limp, he returned across the street to the bus station and approached the scale.

He stepped on the scale and eagerly deposited his Twoonie. When the slip came out, he read, "Your name is Harry Hanson. You live in Grand Forks, British Columbia. You weigh 85 Kilograms. You are ten Kilos overweight. You are still on your way to visit your sister

in Kelowna, but while you were across the street fooling around, you missed the bus. Have a nice day, anyway.”

-The Reverend Gary Hamblin

Sources: Herbert O'Driscoll “*The Word Among Us*”. William Bausch, *A World of Stories*; Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, Ed., *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*; Richard Rohr, *Contemplation in Action*, in *his Daily Meditations*; and, *Breathing Under Water*.

An Irish Blessing

May God Bless you this day and always.
Warm be the love that surrounds you,
Good be your friends, and true,
Constant the hope and promise,
Useful the work you do,
Close be your family around you,
Good health be yours day by day,
long be the life you're living,
And full of much joy on the way.
Amen

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