

Proper 9A: Romans 7:13-25
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
July 9, 2023

Sinners Anonymous

Early in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, we meet Jim Casy, a one-time revivalist preacher who eventually gave up his ministry because he could no longer stand the hypocrisy within his own soul. When Casy meets up with Tom Joad, he swiftly unburdens himself by making a serious confession. "Tell you what—I used ta git the people jumpin' an' talkin' in tongues, an' glory-shoutin' till they just fell down an' passed out. An' I'd baptize to bring 'em to. An' then—you know what I'd do? I'd take one of them girls out in the grass an' I'd lay with her. Done it ever' time. Then I'd feel bad, an' I'd pray an' pray, but it didn't do no good. Come the nex' time, them an' me was full of the sperit, I'd do it again. It worried me till I couldn't get no sleep. Here I'd go to preachin' and I'd say, 'By gum, this time I ain't gonna do it.' And right while I said it, I knowed I was."

There's no telling whether Steinbeck was familiar with Paul's letter to Romans, much less if he had it in mind, when he wrote this scene. But the verse we just heard read "The good that I would do, I do not; the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" expresses well the struggle that Casy had as a preacher. Knowing what he was doing was wrong but being unable to stop, wanting to do the right thing but something in him prevented him from following through.

It's not just Casey, of course; many Christians, most of us, can identify with this situation. We do certain things or say certain things and we know they are wrong and we pray it will never happen again, but then it does anyway and we decry our own weakness even as we search for an explanation for why again and again we go against even our own best intentions. So when we hear Paul wrestling with his failures to act rightly, we say, "Yep, that's me, too." "Been there, done that." That spiritual battle waging in Paul is going on in us too.

It's strange, those outside the Church often have the opinion that we Christians have it all together, that we think we are morally superior to everyone else. But the fact is, very few, *if any*, Christians in history have ever claimed that they are without sin. Very few, if any, have ever gone through the "Confession and Absolution" portion of worship merely twiddling their thumbs waiting for it to be over because they had no sins to confess. Anyone who's faithful and serious about their faith, the one thing they know is that they fall far short of the ideal. If they are committed to following Jesus, they are keenly aware that they have a long way to go to catch up to him.

But what Paul is talking about here in this morning's lesson goes beyond acknowledging our universal sinfulness. It is not just that we make mistakes, that we backslide as Christians, that we should've known better. What Paul is talking about is how we find ourselves inextricably unable to do the right thing even when we want to. It's more than being tempted or being torn between two goods. The issue is, we know what we should do but we can't do it. The problem is not just ignorance or bad company, to be solved with education and social improvements. There's

something in us that pulls us in the wrong direction, pulls away from what we know is good and right.

St Augustine of Hippo, the 4th-century theologian, knew well what this was like. As a youth and young adult, he was constantly pulled in the wrong direction, giving in to selfish pleasures— food, drink, women, carousing, misbehavior for misbehavior's sake, despite knowing full well that his actions were wrong. But he couldn't explain why he did those things. Later, when he was a mature Christian and bishop, he sought to make sense of his misspent youth as he reflected on the nature of freedom. He came to the conclusion that when it comes to freedom, we are naive. We do not have "*free* choice" at all.

To understand Augustine's point, consider how we in America pride ourselves for living in a "free country." We just celebrated Independence Day, the day our country declared its freedom from the tyrant-king in England. Independence, freedom, is treated as the end-all and be-all of American virtue. And when asked what that means, most people will say that freedom is being able to do what we want, to choose for ourselves. We see it almost as a right, the ability to exercise free and unfettered choice, and we bristle under anyone who would place any limits on our choices.

But Augustine, if he were here today, would scoff at our conceit. He'd say, no matter how much we assert our liberty, we are not free at all. We like to imagine that without any external constraints, we would be able to weigh the arguments for and against different courses of action, as if on a scale, and then take the best, most attractive option. But what if those weights aren't balanced, what if there was a thumb on the scale, making us more likely to make the bad choice.

That's the situation we are in, Augustine argues, on account of sin. Like Paul before him, Augustine saw sin not just as an action, doing wrong, or even something you think. It's more than that, it's a power, a force, pulling us down, a shackle that enslaves us to sin again. It's like this. When we sin, the sinful act carves a rut in our soul, making it more likely we would sin again. And the more we sin, the more likely we are to sin again, like that preacher Jim Casey. Our will is bound, led, as if in chains, to do what we know is wrong.

So we end up willing, wanting the wrong things, and then choosing the wrong things, yet boasting that we have chosen them "freely." But rather than evidencing our liberty, our "freedom" to do as we please just shows how un-free we really are.

A young woman was meeting with her therapist. And she described for the therapist a life of indulgence that was becoming self-destructive: parties, alcohol, sex, and drugs. It was a downward spiral. Then the therapist asked: "So why don't you stop?" The young woman was stunned by the question, then she responded, "You mean I don't have to do what I want to do?"

I don't have to do what I want to do. That sounds nonsensical, at least at first. But then thinking deeper, you realize the significance of that statement. You don't have to do what you want. You don't have to give into every impulse or desire. You don't have to let your wants be your only guide for action. Indeed, it would be mad to think otherwise, that you had to indulge every

desire! And yet, like this woman, countless souls today seem to be victims of their own “choice,” enslaved not to some authoritarian, but to their own passions and urges.

What this is akin to, is how addicts describe their addiction. An addiction gets hold of you, keeps you enslaved to it, in bondage, out of control, powerless, unable to break its hold.

If you are at all familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous, you’ll know that according to AA recognizing that powerlessness is a prerequisite for recovery. It’s in fact the first of the Twelve Steps, admitting that “we are powerless over alcohol—and our lives have become unmanageable.” I’ve often thought that alcoholics understand the Gospel best, for they know better than any others the power of sin, what it is like to be enthralled to a power, a force you don’t want, a desire you can’t get rid of.

And indeed, when Bill Wilson and Robert Smith (Bill W. and Dr. Bob to those in AA) when they founded Alcoholics Anonymous, and wrote out their Twelve Steps, what they did consciously was translate basic Christian wisdom and ethics into a guide for recovery from addiction. And they did so in a way that was “spiritual but not religious,” open to God but not requiring any particular belief, so as to be as welcoming as possible to alcoholics, regardless of background. If you’re not familiar with the Twelve Steps, here’s what they came up with:

1. Admit you are powerless over alcohol—that your life has become unmanageable.
2. Believe that a Power greater than yourself could restore you to sanity.
3. Decide to turn your will and your life over to the care of God *as you understand Him*.
4. Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself.
5. Admit to God, to yourself, and to another human being the exact nature of your wrongs.
6. Be entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly ask Him to remove your shortcomings.
8. Make a list of all persons you have harmed, and be willing to make amends to them all.
9. Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continue to take personal inventory and when you were wrong promptly admit it.
11. Seek through prayer and meditation to improve your conscious contact with God, as you understand Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for you and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all your affairs.

As I said, these steps are Christian teachings that have been translated, adapted to the needs of addicts. But what if we translated them *back* into Christianity, “reversed engineered” them, if you will? What if we replaced the specifically Christian character that the founders took out to be more widely acceptable? We’d come up with something like this:

1. Admit you are powerless (not just over alcohol but) over sin—and life has become unmanageable because of it.
2. Believe that God can restore you to sanity.
3. Turn your will and your life over to the care of God the Father.

4. Make a searching and fearless self-examination, acknowledging your sins.
5. Confess to God, to yourself, and to another human being the exact nature of your sins, trusting that you have been forgiven through the cross.
6. Be ready for the Holy Spirit to work in you to remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly ask Him to remove your shortcomings.
8. and 9. Make a list of all persons you have harmed. And make direct amends to such people, where possible.
10. Continue your self-examination and when you fall short admit your sins.
11. Seek through prayer, sacraments, and fellowship with other Christians to improve your conscious contact with God.
12. Share this Gospel to other sinners, and practice these principles in all your affairs.

Forget about the “Sinner’s Prayer” and the “Four Spiritual Laws.” *This* is what becoming a Christian, conversion, really entails. What this is is a simple yet comprehensive plan, a guide to new life in Christ, a path to becoming not a recovering alcoholic but a “recovering sinner.”

Now, to call these steps “simple” as I did, I don’t mean to say they’re easy. As any recovering addict will tell you, recovery is not easy. Rather, it’s simple because these new Twelve Steps are not complicated, not something you have to have a Masters degree to understand, not something that is available only to those in-the-know. It’s not an esoteric or otherworldly ethic. The “Twelve Steps of Sinners Anonymous” I’ve described provide a down-to-earth, straightforward, orderly program, one which depends on God, but at the same time expects us to work with God to resist evil and choose the good.

The point is, even as we ourselves know the struggle Paul describes, wanting to do what’s right and not being able to do it, we are not stuck in this dilemma. There is a way out, there is freedom from sin, we are not powerless after all. For there is another power inside us besides the power of sin—the Spirit of God, who leads us and strengthens us so that we can escape the pull of sin and live righteously with God. So while we Christians still struggle with temptation and yes, we still yield to that temptation all-too-often, in Christ, we are no longer bound to sin. We are bound to God, growing in grace and taking it one day at a time. Thanks be to God!