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Delight in the Law

Core Faith

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

At 250 years, we find ourselves celebrating our nation's ideals while honestly confronting our failures, discovering – like Paul – that true hope comes not from self-reliance but from being rescued and transformed by Christ.

REFERENCES

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalm 45:10-17

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

COLORS

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Preaching Notes

Focus Text: Romans 7:15-25a

250 years: those of us who live in the US are still reeling from the celebration of 250 years as a nation. Was it a celebration of all the history and ideals the nation was founded upon? Or was it a sober reflection upon all that has been lost in recent years and the ways this nation has failed to live up to those ideals? Maybe both? Is such a thing possible? Can we celebrate, give thanks, and be proud even while we are concerned about where we are going these days? Can we enjoy ourselves even when we have serious reservations?

Surely, such a thing is possible. We can sing in prison like Paul and Barnabas. We can be grateful even when we are afraid. We do it all the time in our personal lives as well as in our national and communal existence. We can be on the road to perfection and constantly at war with ourselves. Same old, same old.

Wait, what was that? Something about war? Not a word you expect to see on such a list, in such a moment. Wars start when we are down, or angry, attacked, hurting, or... right? Well, right, they do. The struggle arises at our low points, no question. But in our text for this week, it seems that our problem is more than just “having a bad day.” Paul sees it as something more fundamental than that; more ubiquitous than that; much more... human than that.

Good old Paul. You can always count on him to spoil a perfect celebration. Paul seems to be having a bad day to end all bad days. Or maybe even a bad life. “Wretched man that I am!” He seems to shout to the heavens. “Nothing good dwells within me.” Yeah, I’ve been there. I’ve had those moments when it seemed like all my choices were bad ones, when all my mistakes were big ones, when all my thoughts were broken ones. Yeah, I’ve been there with ya, Paul. So, buck up. Hang in there, and it will get better. You just gotta hold on until the storm passes.

“No,” he replies, “You aren’t listening.” This isn’t a momentary weakness in your impenetrable armored will. This isn’t a “didn’t get enough sleep last night, my biorhythms are out of whack, or “the moon isn’t in the right phase for me right now” kind of thing. This is you. This is the real you. This is the consequence of living in the world as it is now, rather than as it was originally designed. This is the result of sin running loose in the world. This is the universal human condition; it’s not just you, not just an individual. It is corporate; it is national; it is worldwide; it is empire.

Yeah, you say, I get that. I do bad stuff from time to time. I mess up, my bad. I make a goof, a boo-boo, an “open mouth, insert foot moment” in the conversation. I know that I’ll do better; I really will. I can hoist myself up by my bootstraps and try a little harder. Thanks for the reminder there, Paul. Whew, close call there. Thanks for the boost; thanks for the lift. Just thanks.

“No,” says Paul. “You still aren’t listening. I’m not talking about an exercise program. This isn’t about trying harder, digging deeper, climbing higher in your attempt to do good things, to embrace the good, to be good. This is about admitting that there is nothing good in you.”

Whoa there, Paul. There might have been a time when that sort of approach would have worked. When you wanted to scare folks into the faith, when you wanted to shame them into responding to the altar call on your sawdust revival trail. But we’ve gotten a bit more sophisticated these days. We

need goal-setting and strategic plans. We need behavior modification and checks and balances. We need self-esteem raising and awareness training. We need the rules explained and defined, the boundaries clearly marked, and the punishment delineated. We need self-help books: five days to be a better you, six minutes to tighter abs, seven ways to total transformation.

“What you need,” says Paul, “What you’ve always needed and will always need is a savior.” Who will rescue me from this body of death? “We need rescuing,” he says. We can’t save ourselves. And while we know that intellectually, it is hard for us to claim this truth. It is hard for us to live into it every day. Okay, we might accept the need one time for a rescue or a hand up. But then we tend to live the rest of our lives with an “I got this Jesus, thanks anyway” attitude. We live in a world that tells us we can be anything we want to be, which is both true and false at the same time. It is true that opportunities abound for many of us—maybe not all of us—that is the tragic inequality of the world in which we live.

Even so, even without that imbalance, the war within us means we cannot consistently choose the good. We cannot will the right, live in the light. Sin, Paul says, is not an act or even a pattern of behaviors that we choose or to which we succumb. It is, instead, a power and a presence that dwells within us. As long as it is there, our efforts might be successful for a time, but they cannot last, will not last. One commentator likens Paul’s view of sin to the disease called shingles, a viral infection that continues to live in our bodies and —every now and then— breaks out in the rash that causes so much pain. Even when the rash goes away, the virus remains. Even when we don’t engage in sinful acts, Paul says, sin still dwells within us. And the war goes on. No one is strong enough to win that battle on their own. They may hold out for a while; we may hold out for a while. We may want the good and not want the evil, but, says Paul, but ...

Perhaps the illness or the battle metaphors don’t work for you. Both are problematic for many. Maybe we could claim another image from this text. At the center of his struggle, Paul claims that, deep down, he delights in the law of God. He is able, even in his weakened or wavering self, to see the goodness of following God. But he doesn’t have the will to embrace it fully. He doesn’t have the courage to claim this way of living, way of being. It is beyond him, he writes.

“Who will rescue me?” That’s the key to the passage. That question is a cry of faith. It follows the cry of despair, “wretched man that I am.” Wretched woman. Wretched creature. In a world without hope, that is the final cry. But praise be to God, there is another cry to follow. “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” The Lord of life, that’s who.

The promise here is that this disease, this lack of will that dwells within us, can be replaced by the Christ who dwells within. We can be transformed from the inside out. It is sometimes instantaneous, but more often it is a lifetime of inviting the indwelling Christ to come and take up residence within us. I guess that means there is a struggle either way. Either we struggle against the sin that threatens our existence in the world, that makes us ill-equipped to live in community, to maintain relationships, to be content within our own hearts, and we live that constant battle, knowing we will ultimately lose. Or we struggle against our own will that doesn't want to be given over to a loving God who can remake us into what we really want to become. That struggle was described by the late songwriter Rich Mullins in the song "Hold Me Jesus":

Surrender don't come natural to me / I'd rather fight You for something / I don't really want / Than to take what You give that I need / And I've beat my head against so many walls / Now I'm falling down, I'm falling on my knees.

Written by Richard Mullins, Lyrics © Capitol CMG Publishing

When we finally fall to our knees, when we finally surrender, when we embrace a delight in obedience to the law, then we find a new strength; we find a new support network; we find a new possibility. We find the sun still shining even though the clouds have rolled in. We find hope instead of despair. We find joy instead of shame. We find goodness within and all around us. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!

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