

“God has done ... what the law could not do”

Psalm 119:105-112 and Romans 8:1-11

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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The second reading today is from the New Testament, from Paul’s Letter to the Romans. I mentioned last week that Romans is an unusual kind of letter. In fact, in many ways, it’s not a letter at all. It doesn’t look like any of the other letters that Paul wrote in the first century A.D.

We should probably think of Romans as a “here’s what I believe” introduction. Paul had never met the people he was writing to, but he wanted them to know what he believed, what his teaching amounted to, before he came to them.

So, chapter 7 was about sin, the hopelessness of the human condition, and then chapter 8 begins to present the solution or the hope we have. There is a way out of our terrible circumstances.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

There is a book called *The Examined Life*, and it was written by Robert Nozick who was a Harvard philosopher. He died in 2002, but his book is still around. And I remember picking it up one day. I cannot be trusted at a used book sale. Maybe you know how this goes. I usually come home with lots of books that I do not need and have no time to read.

But for some reason I started to read this one. I think it was the title – *The Examined Life* – that captured my attention – and I could not put it down.

Nozick was writing, in one chapter, about the Holocaust. And for the record, between 1941 and 1945, six million Jews who were living in Europe, two-thirds of the total number of Jews living in Europe at the time, were hunted down and murdered.

And for Nozick, as it was for many people, the Holocaust was a turning point in history. More than a turning point, in fact. Nozick, who is not a believer, compares the Holocaust to the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden, something that altered the situation and status of humanity. We are all stained, he writes, as a result of what happened.

I don't usually do this – I don't usually read long passages – but I want to read for you what Nozick writes:

I believe [these are Nozick's words] the Holocaust is an event like the Fall in the way traditional Christianity conceived it, something that radically and drastically alters the situation and status of humanity...Mankind has fallen.

It now would not be a special tragedy if humankind ended, if the human species were destroyed in atomic warfare or the earth passed through some special cloud that made it impossible for the species to continue reproducing itself. I do not mean that humanity deserves this to happen... What I mean is that [...humanity's] loss would now be no special loss above and beyond the losses to the individuals involved. Humanity [this is how Nozick concludes] has lost its claim to continue.

I want to come back to that in a moment.

Last Sunday I announced that I would be preaching a very short sermon series, just three sermons, on Romans 7 and 8, two chapters which are at the center of the one of the most important books of the Bible.

Martin Luther, as an example, thought Romans was so important that he challenged his people, the members of his congregation, to memorize it – the entire letter. Think of that. When was the last time you committed a single verse to memory?

I didn't challenge you last week to memorize Romans, but I said that these two chapters are the hinge on which the entire gospel turns. If you miss what happens here, then you have missed the point of the Christian message.

So, last week's message was about sin. Paul concludes chapter 7 by saying, **“Wretched man that I am. Who will save me from this body of death?”**

And then, I went on to talk about our sinful condition. I said that we like to blame Satan for tempting us and planting deceptive thoughts in our minds and for twisting our thinking and for poking and probing our armor looking for weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but I said the real problem is not Satan. The real problem is ourselves, you and me. We are the ones who cannot and will never be able to live rightly and justly and morally. We are incapable on our own.

So, I went home last week feeling pretty good about what I had done. I don't always go home feeling good about my sermon, but last week I allowed myself to think that I had gotten it right. I had chosen a summer Sunday, and a fairly hot one too, and I had talked about sin, and I had gotten away with it. No one felt condemned. No one felt shamed. No one, as far as I know, left feeling worse than when he or she walked in the door.

And I think it's fair to say that if a preacher can preach about sin on a hot July morning and hold the attention of most people for 20 or 25 minutes, then that would be a pretty good sermon. There's a high degree of difficulty in that challenge.

But on Monday something happened. This is not new behavior, unfortunately. And I hate it when it happens. I started to preach that sermon over again. Not aloud, and not in front of a group of people, but I started to go through it again, line by line. And I realized that I had not done so well after all.

As a matter of fact, this may surprise you, I think I trivialized the awful situation we are in. I trivialized sin. I don't think I said anything wrong, or anything I need to take back today, but I certainly did not capture the awfulness of our situation. Robert Nozick, Harvard philosopher, not a believer (as far as I know), gets it right.

“Humanity has lost its claim to continue.” Now we have the words to understand our situation. And the Apostle Paul would agree with that assessment. If we all disappeared tomorrow, as Nozick puts it, that would be justified, because of what we have done, because of what humanity has done.

I sometimes like to read in the literature of addiction. And the reason is that there are such close parallels to the spiritual life. The 12-step program, which was devised by a man named Bill Wilson and published in 1939, around the time that Alcoholics Anonymous was started, is a close parallel to the Christian life.

In fact, a long time ago, I preached a summer series on the 12 steps, taking one step a week for 12 weeks.

Well, as you might imagine, there are debates in the field of addiction, lots of them, controversies about how to understand and treat addiction, and one of those debates is about hitting bottom and whether or not every addict has to hit bottom...in order to be ready to get sober and start recovery.

The conventional wisdom has always been that every addict – no matter what the addiction happens to be – alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, you name it – every addict has to hit bottom in order to have a chance at sobriety and recovery.

And then, at some point, I don't know when this happened, Alcoholics Anonymous adjusted its thinking slightly on what bottom looks like. Some alcoholics, they said, find their bottom higher than others.

Some alcoholics have to become homeless and destitute and so on before they are willing to start the long road to recovery, and others are known as “high bottom” drunks. Have you heard that expression? “High bottom” drunks don’t have to lose their jobs and marriages and families. And they don’t have to alienate all of their friends. Those people can get sober too.

And you won’t be surprised to know that I find all of this interesting, and I continue to wonder what it means for Christian faith. How low do you have to go in order to want the offer of salvation that Christian faith offers? How bad does it have to get before Jesus begins to sound pretty good?

A number of years ago, the denomination that I am a part of, began to offer evangelism training seminars. Membership was going down, and so out of desperation (I think) more than a desire to share the gospel, everyone was suddenly talking about the importance of evangelism, of sharing the faith, being intentional about it.

And one of the seminars I attended was called “**friendship evangelism.**” I think that sounded good to me, and so I went and took a few church members with me.

And we learned that when people hit bottom in their lives, when they experience a crisis of some kind, when they go through a divorce or a bankruptcy, when they lose a job or suffer the loss of someone close to them, it’s then that they are most receptive to faith in a loving God. Studies, we were told, confirm that this is so.

And it makes sense, doesn’t it? When we are desperate, when we have run out of other options, when life as we have known it seems to be crumbling around us, it’s then that we are open to just about anything. We are willing to think about God in a way that we were never willing before.

And some people, as you know, need to become more desperate than others, but everyone (or almost everyone) needs to find a bottom – or what feels like a bottom.

I sometimes meet with people in my office, and this began long before I moved to Zurich, and these people who made an appointment to talk would be struggling with something or other, and they would say to me, **“Do you have a book that you would recommend? Or is there talk I can listen to online, you know, a TED Talk, or something like?”**

And in those situations, I never say this, maybe I should, but I usually find myself thinking, **“You know, I wish that all problems in life could be solved by watching someone speak online. I wish your life could be turned around by reading just the right book which I happen to have on the shelf behind me. But is that really how it happens? Is that really how God takes hold of us, puts the Spirit of life within us, and changes us, so that we become new creations altogether?”**

We’re always looking for an easy solution. Oh, we think, there must be something I haven’t thought about. And if only I could put my hands on this one thing, if only I could spend an evening reading (something I enjoy anyway so it’s not a hardship), if only I identified the right Christian counselor, then maybe I might be able to turn things around and get back on the right track and start living again.

So, the first thought when we hit bottom is to look for a shortcut. Today I feel sick and tired and desperate, but tomorrow – who knows? – I can be back on top, if I only could find the magic pill that will turn things around.

I hate to tell you this, but there are no quick fixes and no magic pills, and even the most skilled Christian counselors cannot put us back together again ... as quickly as we would like.

Even the most dramatic conversion stories I have ever heard suggest that there is a long road to health and sobriety and growth and new life.

One time, at the church I served before this one, I was meeting with a person in my office. And it was a lot like previous conversations. The person who came to see me was at the bottom, and something had to happen.

And suddenly I had an idea. I said, **“Let’s go for a walk.”** In my last church, my office was just a few steps from the sanctuary. And so we headed over to this large, dark, empty sanctuary.

Now, I probably spend a lot more time in dark, empty sanctuaries than you do. I have gone there to pray, to sit and think. But for most people, including this person I was meeting with, it was a new experience.

And we stood at the front of the church at the communion table, which – once again – is not something many people do. We never get all that close to the holy of holies. Anyway, I suggested to him that we pray, that we offer this thing that was creating chaos in his life to God.

And something about that setting – the darkness, the holiness, the nearness of God, which seems more real to us in church than it does at home – something about that setting provided the breakthrough. There were tears, there was laughter, there were unmistakable signs that something had happened. A page had been turned, and a new life opened up.

So, what I want to say to you today is that, in terms of the spiritual life, there is no high bottom. I wish I could make this easier for you. If it were in my power, I would take away all of the pain in your life, and you would do the same for me, but I can’t do that. And neither can you. No human being can.

To fully appreciate the first words in Romans chapter 8, we need to recognize the gravity of our situation.

Paul writes, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** Truly some of the most beautiful, inspiring, hopeful words in all the world.

But still, you might think, **“Oh my, let’s not be overly dramatic about it. Condemnation? That seems like a strong word.”**

And yes, the truth of the matter is, condemnation is a very strong word. It’s courtroom language, of course, which Paul uses often in his letters in this connection, whenever he is talking about our lives and what we deserve.

And as far as Paul is concerned, our situation is precarious, it’s deserving of death. As Nozick said, **“We’ve lost our claim to continue.”** Things are worse than we are willing to admit.

But then comes the good news, the extraordinary news in verse 2, **“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”**

So here’s what that means, as Paul wants us to understand this. There is no longer anything you can do. There is no book you can read, there is no Christian counselor with just the right words and just the right kind of compassion and understanding.

Your best efforts are not going to be enough. In fact, just the existence of the law – this is really Paul’s most astonishing insight – the very existence of the law, this notion we have that maybe we could do it by working hard enough, is going to crush you.

Even if you try your best and read every self-help book you can find and watch every TED Talk that has ever been produced, you are lost.

Remember quicksand in old Tarzan movies? There's actually a very famous scene with quicksand in the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*.

The more you struggle to free yourself, the more you sink into it.

To be honest, I don't even know if there is such a thing as quicksand, I have a feeling that it's a myth, but the image from these old movies is burned into my memory. I think I had nightmares.

Your only hope, if you somehow found yourself in quicksand, your only hope is if someone reaches out a hand, or throws a rope, or somehow pulls you out.

Because, without help, you are going down.

That's what Paul means to say to us. It's the law of the Spirit of life in Christ that has set you free from the quicksand, from the law of sin and death.

If, at some point in your life, you were sinking, and you took the outstretched hand of a loving God, good for you. Let's remember and enjoy and give thanks for that moment today.

If you are there right now, if you are at bottom or close to it, if you have exhausted every possible idea that you had to save yourself, then I invite you to take the hand that is stretched out to you. Take it...as you have never taken hold of anything in your life. And live. For the first time in weeks, or months, or years, begin to live and breathe and experience hope.

That is the Spirit of Christ coming alive inside you. And there is nothing in all creation quite like it.

Let's pray... Spirit of Christ, come alive in us. Lead us out of the bottom where we have found ourselves. Help us lose this idea that we have what it takes, that we can find our own solution, that with hard work and perseverance and endurance we can prevail. Rescue us, we pray, and set us on the path to life. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.