

Sunday, July 16, 2017 – Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

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

Sermon title: “God has done...what the law cannot do”

Last Sunday I announced a mini-sermon series (no mini sermons, but a mini series) focusing on Romans 7 and 8, which I called the hinge on which the good news turns. Romans 7 (actually Romans 1-7) is Paul’s painful and devastating description of the human condition: “I do not understand my own actions.” I argued in my sermon that too often we turn to the remedy before understanding the problem, and so it was (and is) essential to understand what Paul says in Romans 7. But now, not soon enough, we turn to Romans 8, which some have called their favorite chapter in the entire Bible.

1. Speaking of favorite chapters, I’m curious to know if you have one. If could take one chapter of the Bible to a desert island, which one would it be. Many would say Romans 8. Would you?
2. Last week I raised an important issue of biblical interpretation: In Romans 7, is Paul describing the life of a person prior to becoming a Christian? Or is he describing the inevitable wrestling with sin that is the life of a believer? If you read Romans 8 in its entirety – and feel the joy of these words – it seems clear that Paul regards the sin described in Romans 7 as belonging to the past, life prior to becoming a Christian. Read these verses and ask yourself that question once again.
3. My friend Scott Hoezee, whom I quote often in these home group sermon questions, puts it this way: Paul clearly states that after baptism, we as believers are re-located in a whole different realm and spiritual “place.” The Spirit is in charge in this new land we inhabit and not the flesh, not death, not anything remotely gloomy. Long gone are our struggles with a sin we are powerless to overcome. Banished from our hearts and minds is the fear that comes from wondering if you are doing enough to please God, to curry his saving favor. I agree with Scott; I wonder how this squares with your own experience. Do you find yourself today in a totally different spiritual realm because of what the spirit of God has done in your life?
4. I grew up in a Christian tradition in which believers frequently wondered about their own salvation. When Paul (in another place) warns about “eating and drinking the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner,” they took these words to mean that they should refrain from the Lord’s Supper on those occasions when they felt outside God’s grace. What would you say to believers who express serious reservations about whether or not they are saved? Do you know anyone like this? Have you ever wondered about the certainty of your own salvation?
5. You may want to go back and read Romans 6:6...“we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” For Paul – and I feel quite confident in this statement – there is something radically different about the new life into which we are born, even if signs of our old life pop up now and then. Among other things, believers begin to give evidence of what Paul calls (in another place) “fruits of the Spirit” – namely, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you see some bits of these things in your life, that means you are on your way! The past is finished and gone, as we say in the Assurance of Pardon, and the new life has begun. Are you convinced? Be honest.

6. The late Paul Achtemeier, a biblical scholar for many years at a Presbyterian seminary in the U.S., has written that “the freedom that Christ gives the Christian [is] to stop brooding about a wicked past and to turn his or her attention to the present life with its opportunities for good. Preoccupation with how bad one might have been in the past, and unwillingness to let it go, is a form of resistance against God’s freeing Spirit. If God forgives sin through Christ, why should the Christian insist on cherishing its memory? Forgiveness is real. It should be taken seriously” (found in his preacher’s commentary on Romans). I wonder how you are doing with letting go of a past that you are not particularly proud of? Do you spend time thinking about it? Feeling guilty about it? How seriously have you taken the forgiveness that has been promised to you? What part of “no condemnation” do you not understand?

7. Ezekiel’s image (chapter 37) of the dry bones comes to mind here. God promises to “re-create” his people in such a way that it can be compared to calling them back from the dead! By the end of chapter 8, Paul essentially breaks into song. Tell me, is there anything we can do at this point except to sing in thanksgiving?