

## Sunday, July 9, 2017 – Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: Psalm 45:10-17 and Romans 7:15-25a

Sermon title: “I do not understand my own actions”

This week and for the next two Sundays – in other words, July 9, 16, and 23 – I will be preaching a short sermon series that focuses on the heart of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. This focus is not to say that the rest of Romans is unimportant! On the contrary, Romans is arguably the most important letter that Paul wrote, and the letter is an extended argument or discussion about Paul’s theology. On the other hand, chapters 7 and 8 are probably mentioned more than any other part of the letter – and not only for their eloquence.

You may want to read these verses in chapter 7 again before reflecting on the sermon questions. Or better yet, read the same verses in a different translation.

1. Lots of people complain about that “confession and assurance” ritual that we perform most Sundays. But no one has ever complained that it’s “unnecessary” because there is no sin to confess. All of us, it seems, recognize that we fall short or miss the mark to varying degrees. It’s not surprising then that these verses from chapter 7 seem to resonate with most readers. We seem to know what Paul is talking about, even if his logic and rhetoric are difficult to understand. In fact, before moving on, maybe it would be helpful – either alone or in a group – to acknowledge the serious state of our sinfulness. One of the puzzles of the Christian life is that we can be – at the same time – “simul justus et peccator,” which was the Latin phrase Martin Luther used to describe his own situation (and every other believer): “At the same time justified and a sinner.”
2. What stands out almost immediately when reading these verses is how confused Paul is by his own behavior. In just seven verses Paul uses some form of the verb “to do” no fewer than 21 times! That’s an average of three per verse. (This is one reason why Paul’s logic here is so difficult to unravel.) In the original Greek here – stay with me! – we find three different verbs meaning “to do” or “to perform.” These are not references to sins of omission, but to real actions and behaviors in Paul’s life. It is an ongoing discussion among biblical scholars as to whether or not there are significant differences in meaning among these different verbs. What most translators have concluded is no, and therefore they translate ALL of these verbs as “to do.” What appears to agonize Paul, as he reflects on his life, is how routinely, repeatedly, his life fails to match up with God’s expectations, as expressed in the law. What is of critical importance here is that we face up to our own helplessness. That is the starting point for our being made righteous before God. Do you see that? Do you have a guess as to why Paul found that starting point so difficult to reach? (Hint: something to do with the law.)
3. Here’s an absolutely critical point to notice: Paul is NOT describing the Christian life in chapter 7. These verses were not written to describe a Christian’s everyday struggles, but rather what life is like BEFORE a person becomes filled with the holy Spirit. I think that point is critical to understanding what Paul is arguing here. **Romans chapter 7 was not intended to describe the life of a Christian.** So, then, what is Paul actually talking about? If you start at the beginning of Paul’s letter and read straight through chapter 7, it seems clear that Paul is telling the Romans why they, like everyone, are in trouble. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. This is the human predicament. And what’s more, there is nothing we can do about it. Our life is like someone caught in quicksand. The more we struggle, the worse off we are. The reason that this point is so critically important is that most people today seem not to recognize their hopelessness. Becoming a Christian is a way for a good person to become better. Or as someone once expressed it to me, **“I’m not that bad, and God isn’t that mad.”**
4. To understand the logic here, it’s helpful to understand the structure of the letter. I grew up in a tradition where children and youth were required to memorize the Heidelberg

Catechism. (We also heard weekly sermons based on this catechism, so I know it well!) The structure of that catechism mirrors the structure of Paul's Letter to the Romans – in other words, sin, salvation, service. Or, to use another letter of the alphabet, guilt, grace, gratitude. What Paul is doing in chapters 1-7 is describing the human predicament in stark terms. We are lost. Even when we think we are fine, we are lost. And then, in chapter 8, Paul finally begins to explain what the solution is – namely, the sacrifice of God in the person of Jesus Christ or our salvation. And once God accomplishes our salvation – for us and without our help! – then we are set free to live lives of service and gratitude. Sin, salvation, service.

5. To summarize, here's what my friend Scott Hoezee (a teacher of preachers in the U.S.) says about chapter 7: "Romans 7, all of it, is clearly a description of what life is like before the Spirit of God comes to us, thus making us alive in Christ, making us more than conquerors, making us joyful in the knowledge that even the darkest of all our sins have long since been put away forever. Romans 7 ends with a wretched body of death. Romans 8 ends with the glorious life of victory. What makes the difference is the coming of the Holy Spirit who places us 'in Christ' where we are not dead but alive, not guilty but forgiven, not wretched but joyful."