

Why Can't I Do What I Want? Romans 7:14-25a Pentecost 5A17

In the Disney movie, Dumbo, the engine, Casey Jr., struggles to pull the train up a long hill. He climbs while repeating, "I think I can, I think I can". He's finally makes it to the top. As he runs downhill he triumphantly repeats, "I thought I could, I thought I could." What an inspiration for those trying to reach their goals.

However, with the problem of sin, it's different. As we try to obey God's commands, "I think I think I can" is followed by "No, I can't". We might echo Casey Jr, but with a puzzled expression: "I thought I could".

What happened? Why can't I do what I want to do? "Can't" is not about permission, but ability. We confess with Paul "I can't do what I want." And why not?

Martin Luther summed up Paul's personal testimony of struggles in the Latin phrase that means "simultaneously just and sinner." He meant that by God's grace through Christ we are considered just, or saints, in God's eyes. At the same time, in view of God's law, we are still sinners, forgiven, but sinful.

The Law continues to reveal this. Another saying, "the law always accuses". While we must admit that while the Law is good and spiritual, because it's source is God, it glares a harsh light of truth on the darkness of our hearts and deeds.

But did you need me to tell you that you are still a sinner? Not if you know God's Law and are honest with yourself. Shall we do a quick review of those laws, lest we fail to see our failures?

In last week's Gospel, Jesus told his followers that if you love even the dearest relative more than Him you cannot be his disciple. Of course, that is for all other idols. Luther explained that you violate the first commandment if you fear, love, and trust anything above God. That covers all our ties to people, possessions, and pet sins.

All commandments expose both sins of commission and of omission. They show us that the good that the saint in me wants to do, the sinner in me doesn't do, while the evil that the saint in me wants to avoid the sinner in me in fact does.

We are two people, all the time. We all have that good and bad angel with us constantly. They are not two spiritual beings outside of us, but the saint and sinner inside every one of us at the same time.

And that is the problem! That is why I can't do what I want to do. Or to be more clear, why the I that is just can't do what is good. The I that is the sinner gets in the way.

But our frustration over that is actually a good thing. It shows that we still love God enough to be disappointed in ourselves when we disobey Him.

However, there is a grave warning for those who feel little or no disappointment. Flip Wilson made famous the excuse, "the devil made me do it" while standing before a judge in his comedy skits. It was humorous, because we all recognize that we attempt the same excuse with our divine judge. But denying our sin nature or lessening the Law and the punishment for violating it will ultimately destroy our faith.

So I ask the question in another sense: Why can't I do what I want? But now by the word "can't" I refer to permission. Since the saint in me is unable to do the good I want, why can't the sinner in me do whatever that sinner wants to do? Why try to be good if I will fail? The question itself exposes an unbelieving heart that does not love the law of God and is not grieved by disobeying it.

Remember, the Law is doing a good thing in showing us the sin that condemns all. It causes us to despair and cry out for the only remedy from sin: Jesus Christ. It is He who says, Come to me you who labor to do the good you cannot do, who are worn out with frustration because you don't do what you should, but do what you should not. Zechariah called Jesus the righteous one, full of salvation, who rode humbly into Jerusalem to die, that we may by faith alone have peace from God that our sins are forgiven.

We are thus able to live with the tension of being both saint and sinner. Because of God's grace we can face the truth of sin but not be condemned by it. How do we do that? In the first of His 95 Theses 500 years ago, Luther wrote, "*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*" Until your life is over and Christ rescues you once and for all from your wretched state, keep repenting your status as sinner. It brings rest for your soul because it points you Christ. And He has already declared you to be a forgiven saint. Amen

Witness Word: Final take-away.

Cherokee story: A grandfather is talking with his grandson and he says, "There are two wolves inside of us which are always at war with each other. One of them is a good wolf, which represents things like kindness, bravery and love. The other is a bad wolf, which represents things like greed, hatred and fear."

The grandson stops and thinks about it for a second then he looks up at his grandfather and says, "Grandfather, which one wins?" The grandfather quietly replies, the one you feed.

While not a perfect analogy, it suggests why you came here today. To nourish and find rest for your soul with Christ's forgiveness of sin from hearing His Words and partaking of his body and blood. Fed on the grace of God through His gifts to the church, our "good wolf" or "the saint in us" will win more often.