

Hespeler, 5 July 2020 © Scott McAndless

Zechariah 9:9-12, Psalm 145:8-14, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

There have been times in my Christian life and walk when the words of the Apostle Paul that we read this morning from his letter to the Romans were the words of my own heart: **“Wretched man that I am!”** Oh yes, there have been seasons when that was my daily refrain. And I would have cried it out for pretty much the same reasons that Paul gives in his letter. That is what I find so fascinating about it.

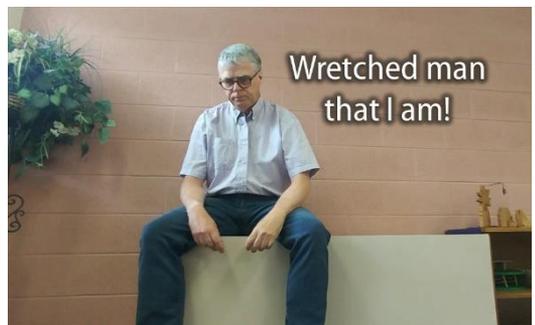
It’s like Paul reached down through two thousand years of history and was able in a moment to see everything that was on my heart and put it into words. For I too had these clear expectations about who I was supposed to be and how I was supposed to act – expectations that had been placed upon me by the faith in which I had been raised – and yet again and again I disappointed myself. The good that I intended to do I did not do and instead I did the very thing that I very much did not want to do.

Now, in different seasons of my life, I have lived out this sense of disappointment in myself in very different ways. The particulars of what I have struggled with have changed, as I’m sure they did with Paul as well, but the struggle itself seems so familiar.

Let me give you some concrete examples of the various struggles I’ve had in different seasons. I’ll start with one that I think is common to most young men. There was a time in my life when I was rather overwhelmed with sexual thoughts, feelings and desires. I know now that a great deal of that was a normal part of the social and biological realities that I was dealing with and that what I was feeling was actually quite healthy. But I did not know that at the time.

I don’t know how many times that I vowed to myself and to God that I would be different and that I would behave differently. I don’t know how many times I disappointed myself and felt overwhelmed with guilt and shame. And often, and this is also a pretty normal pattern, those feelings of guilt and shame would be the very thing that would fuel thoughts or behaviour that pushed me even further into guilt and shame. Ah, wretched young man that I was.

So that was definitely one time when I felt that struggle, but I’m glad to say that that time did end for me. I grew up and came to see that my sexuality, in itself, was not a bad thing and certainly not a shameful thing. In my maturity, I came to understand that it was a good thing, a gift of God and a great blessing, even if it might be a little bit complicated to navigate at times. As I’ve gotten older, as the hormones in my body simmered down a little bit, it is also true that my feelings about it all have become a bit easier to manage. But there is no denying that, at the time, it really was a big deal and it caused me so much agony. But, on a certain level, I felt that it was a struggle that I needed to engage in in order to be



the person that I felt that I was being called to be.

And this is not just something that has happened to me in dealing with sexuality which, honestly, is something that our society has a real tendency to tie itself into knots over. At various times in my life I have found myself falling into this familiar cycle of intending to do something good, failing to do it and then descending into a cycle of guilt and shame that really only seemed to reinforce bad behaviour. I should know by now that it doesn't work, but it's just a pattern that keeps on happening.

I become concerned about the environment and about the effects of global warming. And so what do I do? I do what Paul set out to do. **"I can will what is right."** I intend to reduce my carbon footprint, to use mass transit and energy efficient vehicles. I set out to always use recycled paper products and plan ahead so that I don't behave in wasteful ways. I have the best of intentions. But what do I find? I find that **"I cannot do it."** I fall short. I find that the demands of living in our modern society, of being able to do my job as best as possible, of having a family with its own particular needs often mean that I cannot or I don't have the emotional or physical energy to behave in the most environmentally conscious ways **"I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."**

And then when I fail, I can also become so upset with myself that I will not even try the next time and, because of that cycle of guilt and shame, perhaps the result is that I end up doing even worse than if I had never tried at all. Oh wretched man that I am!

Or think of the problem of racism, something that is very much on our minds these days. Like all of you, I would not want to be seen to be racist in any way. I would even more hate to find myself acting in any sort of racist way. But, as I think we've all been realizing lately, racism it's not just as simple as a matter of individual action.

When there is systemic racism – that is to say when there is a system at work in the world where you live that has some deeply embedded racist attitudes – and we are all part of the system, then you simply cannot escape being part of the problem. I cannot help but benefit, for example, from belonging to a population that is generally not viewed with suspicion. I may even be appalled to discover sometimes that I carry some racist attitudes within me that I didn't even know were there and that I just kind of picked up from the context I grew up in. I try to do what is right, but what happens then when I fall short of my best intentions and disappoint myself? The spiral of guilt and shame continues to swirl. Ah, wretched man that I am!

And I hardly need to say, I suspect, that living in the midst of a pandemic has also created another opportunity for this same cycle to play out. We are all concerned (as well we should be) to not be a vector for the spreading of a potentially deadly illness. And this covid-19 is particularly insidious, is it not, as it is apparently an illness that you can spread even if you feel perfectly well yourself and so have no idea that you are carrying it. So, yes, I do set out every single day to do the right thing. I will keep my social distance. I will wear a mask when the situation calls for it. I will keep my hands clean and be aware of touching things that might lead to transmission.

“I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” Yes, it seems, sooner or later at some point in my day, I am going to slip up or fall short. I’ll forget to take the mask or neglect to put it on. I’ll mess up on the distance. Or perhaps I’ll get angry at someone else for their transgressions and send them into that old spiral of guilt and shame that sometimes leads to people, in a kind of defensiveness, to deliberately act in irresponsible ways as we seem to be seeing more and more. Yes, in this time of wretchedness brought on by a deadly pandemic, I seem to find ways to make myself even more wretched by being disappointed in myself. Wretched man that I am.

Now, I realize that my struggles are not the same as the struggles you have had in your life. If you are a woman, the words **“wretched man that I am,”** are likely not going to resonate with you. And, as a woman, some of the struggles you had were likely a little bit different. I also recognize that I am a straight white male, part of a uniquely privileged population, and that others, who have not had the same advantages, will have struggled with very different things. But the pattern of the struggle, with cycles of self-recrimination, guilt and shame seems to be quite common.

So I have a question. Is this how it has to be? I mean, assuming that we all are people who want to be good and want to do the right things, is this cycle of wretchedness simply inescapable? Well, that is exactly the question that Paul is dealing with in this part of his letter to the Romans. And the short answer is no, that’s not how it is supposed to be. After he describes so perfectly this cycle that we all seem to fall into so easily, after he cries out in frustration, **“Wretched man that I am!”** he goes on to ask this rhetorical question: **“Who will rescue me from this body of death?”** He asks and then answers the question: **“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”**

Now, that might seem a bit confusing to some people. How can God be the one who frees me from this spiral of best intentions, failure, guilt and shame? Isn’t God the one who sets me up for it in the first place? Isn’t God the one who set those high expectations that I always seem to fall short of in the first place? Isn’t God the one who seems to be so intent on punishing me for every little infraction and the one who is always eager to pile on the guilt and the shame? I thought God was the problem and here Paul is telling me that God is actually the solution!

God is not the problem – that is what Paul is saying. The problem is our misunderstanding of God. The problem is so many thousands of years of human religion (including, let’s be honest, a fair bit of Christian history) that has reinforced the idea that God is only interested in coercing us to act in certain ways through the threat of punishment. This is also tied, of course, to thousands of years of human history of people using God and religion to force others to behave in the ways that they would like. This is not about who God *is*, but only about who we have perceived God to be.

That is why the full text of Paul’s answer is, **“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** because it is through Jesus Christ that we come to see who God really is. And the God that we come to know through Jesus is a God who is *not* all about setting unreasonable expectations or punishing us for every failure or shortcoming. In Christ Jesus, God actually breaks through to us – comes to us

and is able to relate to us as human beings. That is the importance of the incarnation, of the Father becoming completely human in the Son and fully experience all of our weakness, fears and temptations. In Christ, God learns compassion for us and for our humanity.

But, more than that, in Christ the true nature of God is revealed to us in a way far more clear than any religious doctrine or even any holy book could reveal it. Jesus shows us the true face of God and what is revealed to us is not a God who is obsessed with obedience, judgement and punishment but rather with forgiveness, grace and reconciliation. It is in knowing this God – in coming to know him by knowing Christ and reflecting on how he so powerfully demonstrated God's grace and love in his death on the cross – that we can begin to find freedom from the wretchedness of the endless cycle of self-recrimination, guilt and shame.

Have you struggled with such wretchedness. I pray that in knowing Christ and his love, you find the freedom and victory that Paul celebrated. In Christ, you were baptized into freedom, liberty and love. Move on and live in that precious gift.