

The Answer is "Yes"

Third Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Genesis 24.34-38, 42-49, 58-67;
Psalm 145.8-14;
Romans 7.15-25a;
Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

Do you ever wonder what is in the verses we skip over when the lectionary has us jumping around? There is usually some good logic involved. In the case of Genesis today it was for the sake of brevity in telling a rather long story, but in some cases it just feels like skipping over the hard stuff. Here's what we would have heard should we have read straight on through the gospel of Matthew today: "Then Jesus began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. Woe to you (and Jesus addresses each city by name)...But I tell you that on the Day of Judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you." That's the lead into this beloved word of comfort and assurance "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Interesting contrast – isn't?

Listen to the tone of the Psalm for today: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down." You can feel in your soul the invitation to rest here in the unconditional love and grace of God. For that very reason in Judaism, believers are encouraged to pray Psalm 145 three times a day¹ – to let this Word be the center of their faith and devotion.

Now shift to the tenor of Romans 7: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand." You can feel the tension in Paul's soul here – the intensity of the struggle to be

¹ Robert A. Cathey, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 200.

faithful and to follow Christ. You can hear the demand and rigor that a life of faith demands from us.

So which is it? Are we to make the center of our faith this invitation to come and rest in the unconditional love of God or this high expectation God has of us to be faithful? The answer, of course, is “Yes”. The center of our faith must hold together both of these seemingly contradictory ideas.

Barry Johnson calls this work of holding two paradoxical thoughts at the same time the work of Managing Polarities². I’ve mentioned this concept before because it’s becoming more and more helpful to me as a way to have a visual map for dealing with the kind of complexity we see in these texts today. I was recently given a new book that Barry Johnson wrote with Roy M. Oswald from the Alban Institute. They are working on taking Barry’s concept of Polarity Management and interpreting it for congregational life. I had been deep into these texts for a week or more, living with these tensions and thinking about how we hold these two truths together when I opened the book and read the first paragraph of the first chapter. “On the one hand, we are told that God is a nurturing God who loves us unconditionally just as we are. On the other hand, we are told that God consistently challenges us to grow spiritually and to lead lives that promote justice, mercy, and compassion....Which is it? Is God essentially loving or essentially demanding?”³

There it is! This is the quintessential paradox. Whole theological traditions have been carved out based on which side of this pole they hang out in. That’s the visual map that Barry Johnson offers. Think of these two ideas as interdependent. You cannot get it right unless you hold both of these ideas at the same time with the proper tension between them. Once you choose one over the other you lose the essential truth of the gospel. So imagine a chart divided into four quadrants with a vertical and horizontal line that run through the center. The two top quadrants describe the positive, life-giving aspects of that side of the idea. Unconditional grace provides that

² Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: A Summary Introduction*, copyright held by Polarity Management Associates, May 2005.

³ Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010) pg. 1.

place to rest, to be free from guilt and anxiety, to find our worth and celebrate our gifts and know ourselves as loved. The demand of the gospel provides a road map and marching orders that give clarity and purpose to our life showing us where to go and how to live and offering motivation to grow and change.

But the moment you hang out on one side of this equation alone what began as life-giving can quickly disintegrate. You begin to discover the shadow side of these ideas. Unconditional grace apart from any sense of demand or expectation can lead to a kind of permissiveness that lacks accountability or a sense of entitlement that diminishes people's motivation. Living with high demand apart from unconditional love can lead to a legalism and perfectionism that can be deadly. The shadow side here can take two very different forms. If you believe yourself to measure up to the demands you can become judgmental and self-righteous. If you believe yourself to be a constant failure you can become paralyzed by your helplessness and shame.

Jesus was addressing his words of comfort and assurance to those who were living on the shadow side of high expectations and unending demand. Throughout the gospel of Matthew and especially this section of chapter 11, whenever Jesus speaks of judgment or issues statements of woe like the ones we skipped over today, they are always directed at those who hold power and have a very strong sense of entitlement. His warnings are for the purpose of shaking the powerful and self-satisfied out of their sense of entitlement to grab hold of the expectation of the gospel. He is looking to get them to understand that how we live matters. To those who live with a heightened sense of expectation and have grown weary from the demands of it - especially those who have little power or esteem in the eyes of the world - they are the ones whom Jesus seeks lift up.

The passage from Romans is a bit more complicated. It sounds as if Paul has gotten swallowed by a very personal internal struggle of guilt and remorse. It sounds as if he is looking at the expectations of God as provided in the law and finds himself lacking. When you look the larger context of this discussion about the law and especially when you compare what Paul says about himself in some of his letters, you realize that Paul

does not suffer from low self-esteem when it comes to the law. He describes himself as a Pharisee when it comes to the law; zealous in his effort to keep every commandment. So scholars have suggested that this passage from Romans 7 is a rhetorical device in which Paul reflects on that part of his past when he was very careful to keep every aspect of the law but speaks in the first person and in the present tense. What he is reflecting on from that part of his life is that even as he gave everything to pursue what he believed to be good – protecting the integrity of God’s truth – he got swept up into something evil when he began to persecute those who were following Jesus.⁴

What Paul is exploring is the powerful way that sin can twist and distort even the best of intentions. Ted Smith is one of my friends from seminary who is now a theologian at Vanderbilt Divinity School and he wrote that what Paul is trying to express is how “sin is an active, aggressive power that seizes hold of God’s good gifts – like the law – and bends them toward death.” Paul is not struggling with how often he failed to live up to the law. His despair is that when he was zealous in his effort to live by and protect the law - he got dragged down into something deadly without even realizing it. It took his conversion for him to finally see that God wanted something very different from him – that despite his good intentions to uphold the law (which is a good gift from God) he was swept into something that was evil.

Ted gives a great example of this in his commentary when he cites the showdown that occurred between civil rights marchers and law enforcement officials on a Bridge in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 1965. Up until that time, many white people in America saw themselves on the side of law enforcement. They were, after all, seeking to uphold the law. But on that day in Alabama, people saw on television the officers beating peaceful marchers and “a sinful power showed itself for what it was.”⁵ Those are the powerful moments when the Spirit is able to break through and hold up a mirror and we can see how sin has corrupted and distorted what may have even begun as a commitment to do what was right. It happened for Paul in

⁴ This whole section is influenced by the commentary of Ted Smith, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pg. 208.

⁵ Ted Smith, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pg. 208.

his conversion. It happened for many in our nation during the civil rights movement during key moments like these.

The message from Paul is to be careful when living into the demands of the gospel that you do not become too convinced of your own righteousness. As Paul writes, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand." And where he ends in this passage is with thanks to God for the unconditional grace and love and forgiveness that we have in Jesus Christ.

I invite you to consider today where you typically hang out. Which shadow side pulls at you? If you know yourself to be rather complacent, settled, and secure, perhaps Jesus' words of warning and call to repentance - the reminder that how we live matters - are worthy of some meditation this week. Or maybe you are one of the weary and you know that the burdens you are carrying are far too heavy and you need to let the end of this gospel just wash over you. Let it be your mantra this week. Or maybe Romans 7 hits a little closer to home for you. I appreciated our guest preacher from two weeks ago and the testimony he offered of the time in his life when his certainty and zeal led him down some roads he regrets. I know I could stand and give some testimony today about moments like that in my own life. When we are feeling pleased with how we are living into the demands of the gospel and ready to point out the ways that others fail, that is when we need to come back to Psalm 145 and remind ourselves that we stand in need of God's unconditional grace as much as anyone else does. We need to remember that part of the demand of the gospel is humility.

So which is it?

Is God demanding today that we work hard to bring our life into alignment with the demands of the gospel - mindful that as we pursue what is good, evil lies close at hand? Or is God inviting us to come and find rest for our weary souls - to be immersed in God's steadfast love and mercy?

Thanks be to God, the answer is "Yes!"