



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Conflict and Ease

Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith – Preaching
Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
June 28, 2020

Conflict and Ease

To come to these closing words of our reading is soothing, and hopeful. An invitation to rest from whatever our burdens are: grief at the loss of a loved one, fatigue from rising numbers of Covid cases, the relentless questions about masks or not, protests and pushback, headway made contrasted with long long histories, wondering what to do with the kids or ourselves all summer, the powerlessness of addiction, the awareness of things that teeter on the edge of, or have fallen into struggles. Yes, Lord give us rest.

But, what about the reading of Paul’s quandary in his letter to the Romans and what Jesus speaks of before his invitation to rest? Do we listen and recognize something of ourselves in what has led up to that invitation?

On a very cursory level I have always leaned into that reading from Paul which says. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

And while this sounds as if Paul is confessing to a personal struggle – it does seem at tension with his deep understanding of Christ’s presence at work in him. So we may here the “I” here as everyone, and we are not alone in this.

In Paul, or this statement, we find a compatriot in our everyday world when we have slipped up on our intentions with a, “drat, why did I do that?” Of course this can range from a “why did I drive too fast, or cut that car off...or why did I eat that cookie, or extra bacon, or take that drink, or go back to sleep instead of exercising...to - why did I avoid that person, or get so angry at (you fill in the blank)... to the breadth of omissions and decisions we choose that do not honor, God, ourselves or others.

Sin here is not about breaking a law or rule, after all Jesus broke *a lot* of rules. No, it is about a broken relationship with God that we are freed from...

And of course, this is not simply a release from responsibility with a “the devil made me do it” shrug of shoulders that saves us, but the fullness of grace that continues to meet us. Grace that opens our eyes and hearts and teaches us again about whose we are and what we are freed from. But both of our readings this morning are *filled* with words of contrasts and contradictions. In Matthew, Jesus begins saying, “To what will I compare this generation?” And really *every* generation will find something here. To be compared to children playing and wanting others to dance, or weeping and wanting others to mourn. We want what we want when we want it! But really our lessons of contrasts give an image more in tune with the idea that we don’t know what we want or are unsure of how to go about it once we do.

Earlier in this chapter John the Baptist, who was in prison at the time, sent his disciples to Jesus to ask...are you the one...or should we wait for someone or something else?! John the Baptist - who proclaimed Jesus’ coming!

Do we live our faith as if we are waiting for someone or something *else* to lead us? Underneath our breath do we hear ourselves again saying, “I do not understand my own actions.” Or more to the point, question and judge the actions of others.

The Confirmation students had, among other things, forms with a series of questions they could use while interviewing members, mentors, and one of us ministers. In addition to going to board and council meetings, it was a way to help them get to know others of their church. Well, one of the suggested questions on their form was, “If you could ask God a question, what would it be?” And as a leader of the Confirmation class for some years now I have been asked that question many times, but my answer is always the same. If I could directly ask God a question, something I would want to know is, am I actually following your will, am I doing and being as you wish I would be?

I know that is my desire and I am sure it is yours as well, but that doesn’t mean I always actually *do* God’s will.

In part that is why I was drawn to these readings this week. The quandary posed by Paul, “I do not understand why I am doing what I do, I do not do what I want. I can *want* to do what is right, but then not do it.”

We have the *desire* to do what is right for ourselves and others, but we clearly have different ideas on how to go about that. We can sight studies or opinions that contrast. Do we wear masks, or does it make a difference? What is the right way to get the economy going? Can we go out, should we stay in...doors open, doors closed. Traveling, visiting, weddings, funerals. What’s the right answer?

Do protesters just create division and destruction or are we learning something new? *Should* schools open and when? The list could go on...Really our heads and spirits are spinning.

We visited with my parents on Father’s Day, sitting outside far enough apart, until my mom got up, leaning on her cane walking on the uneven grass and she just wanted to get closer to any one of her children and grandchildren there.

Whichever way we could respond wasn’t going to be “right.” “I do not do what I want, but I do

the very thing I hate.” Now granted I do not mean to offer this as an example carrying the magnitude presented in Paul’s quandary – but any way those of us there responded; give her a hug or back up and stay away...was a response of love...but still...

My husband Tom is known to interject into a discussion saying, “Truth is truth, you can’t have an opinion about truth.” Of course it is his way of joking and teasing with, “ I’m right and you are wrong.”

So yes, we question what is true, what is fact, what is opinion, and indeed we come to it from so many directions that we forget or don’t know how to come together around what we should all be seeking, the good of the other and to live in God’s way. For what is True with a capital T is God’s grace and mercy for ALL with a capital A.

After all those contrasts and questions about the ways of this generation, like children calling out, trying to get others to do it their way. Or the people not understanding what Jesus was trying to show them, or the “why do I and why don’t I” struggle. We can breathe a sigh of relief when we hear Jesus again, “Come to me, all you that are weary...”

It’s summer after all, time to relax right? Time to take a vacation, God’s got this! Which indeed we long to believe. But Jesus doesn’t exactly say, “I’ll take it from here.” And this is not exactly an invitation to that faith response to “let go and let God” that at times we *need* to practice.

No, it’s complicated by, “Take my yoke upon you and *learn* from me.”

Jesus’ invitation to learn is not so much about acquiring a higher education, it is more about taking on a way of life.

If we know anything about a yoke, it is a fairly heavy, stiff, non-motorized farm equipment that spans the shoulder of two work animals, connecting them to work together to plow a field or pull a heavy load.

And when Jesus speaks of *his* yoke we cannot help but remember the cross as well, and that we are being invited to share in a way of life that may not be easy when challenged to push against our known comforts, stretch ourselves to see and hear the experience, needs, and desires of others in a new way...and this is why Jesus includes with the “take my yoke” the invitation to “learn from me.” For there is the good news!

When we are unsure, or questioning our thoughts or actions, what can we learn from Jesus?

We learn that Jesus welcomed children when others thought they would be a burden. We learn that Jesus found joy in celebrations, like the wedding at Cana or dinner with all sorts of friends. We learn that there are things and systems to stand up and protest for change, because Jesus did. We learn that God is *always* for the oppressed.

We learn it is important to listen deeply and to ask questions like Jesus did when he asked, “do you want to get well?” We learn the need for prayer is real, and the need for communion with God gives us life. We learn that Jesus seemed to grow by listening and learning about the plight of others, such as the Canaanite mother who protested for her daughter’s situation. We learn by Jesus’ friendships how much we need others. We learn that love and forgiveness, grace and mercy are always always the guiding light for truth.

If we are afraid or reluctant to step out in faith, we might see we are in good company. You remember Moses who was both reluctant and then had a lot of anxiety about stepping into the challenge offered to step out toward freedom and make way for others who didn't have his pull or power. And God says to him, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exodus 33:14) Sound familiar? But really, it was with that invitation and promise that the "work" really begins when Jesus says, join me in this work for it is there we find rest. Or as Teresa of Avila said, "Love turns work into rest."

So when we are conflicted and not sure what the answer is or how we should go...we've got the answer when we look to what we know through Jesus. And what is true with a capital T is God's Grace and Mercy for All.

Amen

Morning Prayer

Gracious God,

It is a beautiful day and in it we are reminded of your goodness and care. As we move into this week celebrating this country's independence, we celebrate our dependence and trust in you. Even as we are grateful for the beauty of today, keep us mindful of those whose struggles and needs hold them down – continue to call into our hearts your grace and mercy – and help us know where we may learn and grow and respond.

As we rest in our trust in you we take a moment to offer our private hopes, prayers, and concerns to you in silence to the God who knows us well.

Lord, lead us through the many things that confound or confuse...open our minds and hearts to your grace and mercy. Help us to receive and offer forgiveness...

For those who do not know you, or feel lost and far away- fill that emptiness and draw them close.

When the loss of friends and loved ones break our hearts, bring your peace.

For those who ache and are ill we pray for healing and well being

When and where there is violence and lack of safety- may your peace come.

When lack of understanding divides us- humble us to hear your way to come together.

As we celebrate so many good and grace in our lives- lift our eyes to you.

Amen

Benediction

The Grace of Christ be with you

The love of God surround you

The comfort of the Holy Spirit keep you- that you may live in faith, be of hope and grow in love.

Today and all tomorrows. Amen