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The Christian Finds Rest in Jesus

From the beginning of time, God provided rest for his creation. He blessed the seventh day and set it apart that his human creatures might learn to find their rest in God alone. He mandated that rest in his governance of the nation of Israel in the Sabbath: The word *Sabbath* means *rest*. Besides being practical, however, the opportunity for rest time also carried a spiritual message: God planned to send his Son to provide rest and relief from the burdens sin laid on people. As Jesus DEFINES CHRISTIANS in today's Gospel, he sees us as Christians who find rest in his forgiving love.

Sermon

Romans 7:15-25

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Introduction – So I'm in the Twin Cities for a meeting and I know I have to get back to Mequon by suppertime. I stayed in one of the suburbs and I have to get on I-94 East to head for home. Where do I catch I-94? There are freeways everywhere: I-94W, I-35E, I-35W, I-494, I-694. I see one blue sign after another but none of them says I-94 East. Finally I see one, but the ramp is closed for construction. I see another one; an overturned truck is blocking the ramp. I don't know the back streets; I don't know how to get around. At first, I'm frustrated but pretty soon the frustration turns into panic and then something close to terror. Where is I-94 East? I have to get home! And then I wake up. It was just a dream, a nightmare. People call these dreams anxiety dreams. Most of us have them now and then. There's something we have to do. We try and try and try but we can't do it. Finally we wake up with a jolt and realize it was just a dream. We calm down and go back to sleep—maybe.

In the Second Reading for today, from Romans chapter 7, St. Paul is telling us about an anxiety dream, his anxiety dream—except it wasn't a dream. There was something he wanted and needed to do—he wanted to live his life as a Christian. He tried and tried and tried, but he couldn't do it. He wrote: **I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do.** He said it again: **I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.** It was all like a nightmare for Paul: frustration, panic,

even terror. He was pathetic and miserable. You heard him: **What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?**

It may be that none of us feels this tension and this frustration as deeply as St. Paul did. We may be a little more comfortable with our failings than he was and we may not have the kind of faith expectations that he had for himself. But all of us have been in situations like this. We think something or say something or do something and we say, “Why am I thinking this way?” or “Why did I say that?” or “Why in the world did I do that?” So we’ve all felt the frustration of doing the bad stuff we shouldn’t be doing and not doing the good stuff we should be doing. The trouble is it happens to us again and again—like in an anxiety dream. The trouble is it isn’t a dream. This really happens.

What Paul discovered is that Jesus could wake him up from his nightmare. Paul understood that Christians find relief and rest in Jesus. The truth he wants to share with us this morning is this:

We Live Our Lives in Terror and Triumph

Sometimes Paul wrote with the pronoun “we.” And sometimes he used the pronoun “you.” Here he uses the pronoun “I.” He’s writing about his own personal experience—the terrors and the triumphs he lived with every day.

Paul knew where those terrors came from. God has a standard. We call God’s standard the moral law. God issued the moral law for all people and for all time. God calls some things right and he calls some things wrong; some things good, some things evil. Jesus packaged God’s moral law like this: **Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.** Nothing wrong with any of that. Paul wrote here, **I agree that the law is good.**

When God created Adam and Eve, he instilled in their minds a perfect knowledge of his moral law. He also created them with the ability to respect and love his moral law. The way they felt about God’s law was just like how God felt about it—Not surprising; God had created them in his own image. Well, you know what happened. Adam and Eve sinned. They lost God’s garden, but that wasn’t the worst of it. They also lost God’s image. Their knowledge of the law became confused; their love for the law was gone. They resented God for his demands. The law stood over their heads like the blade of a guillotine. They feared it and hated it because they knew it was going to destroy them. After they sinned, Adam and Eve had a different way of thinking about God—and they passed that different way on to their children and eventually they passed it on to everyone—including you and me. We call this different way of thinking the old Adam—we got it from Adam. Sometimes we call it the sinful self or the sinful nature. All of us have it and Satan controls it.

God decided to fix this. He sent Jesus to provide the obedience we owed God and to endure the punishment that God owed us. As far as God is concerned sin is gone for everyone who puts their faith in Jesus. With Jesus, God restores the image. He gives it back. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!** He wrote to Titus: **Jesus Christ gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.**

So this is where Paul was and this is where we are: Born with a sinful self that despises and disobeys God’s law and born again in baptism with a new self that loves God’s law and obeys it. Lutherans like to say: Saint and sinner at the same time.

So here’s the nightmare (except it isn’t a nightmare) that frustrated and even terrorized Paul: **In my inner being, he wrote, I delight in God’s law. but I see another *self* at work in me, waging war against *the new self in my mind* and making me a prisoner of *the sin* at work within me. Although I want to do good, evil is right there**

with me. Paul knew where the evil came from: **from the sin living in me,** he wrote. **For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.** So there it is: The old self and the new self, living inside us, back-to-back, face to face, and side by side. What happens here? **For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.**

So let's get this all straight. There is more going on in our lives than a little demon in red pajamas with a pitchfork whispering in one ear and a little cherub in white robes with cute wings whispering in the other ear. We have to come to grips with this. Giving in to sin is never cute and it's never OK, not for us Christians. Every time we sin, we're letting our sinful nature control us. We're giving in to a mindset that lives in us that hates God and loathes doing his will. Big sins or little sins—they all come from the old Adam in us and the old Adam is always controlled by Satan. When we let our sinful self control us, we are telling our new self to go jump in a lake which is the same, when you stop to think about it, as telling Jesus to go to hell.

This is the conflict that frustrated and exasperated St. Paul. This is what led him to write: **What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?** You and I need to recognize this conflict. We need to know where sins come from and where sins lead us. We need to take the sinful self seriously.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus was talking to people who were facing a different kind of conflict. Their religious leaders loaded them down with hundreds of laws that nobody could keep and then insisted that they obey these laws or lose out on God. Some of them tried, but most of them just gave up. They were frustrated and just worn out. Jesus called them **harassed and helpless.** And then he said to them (you heard him in the Gospel): **Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.** Jesus was ready to take the load of sin off their backs and give them life with God. Thousands of them came and millions still come today to find rest in Jesus. That's where Paul went. The conflict between his sinful self and his new self frustrated him and made him feel wretched. But he went to Jesus: **Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!** We live our lives in terror, but with Jesus we live our lives in triumph.

St. Paul explained that deliverance and that triumph in the next chapter, in Romans 8. My father told me once that a pastor could preach on Romans 8 for his entire ministry and not repeat himself. We can't do that today. But here are three main points. In the Word and the sacraments God sends us his Holy Spirit and the Spirit gives us life. Here's the first point: **The Spirit who gives life has set you free from sin and death. Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.** The Holy Spirit gives us the desire and the power to drown our sinful self every day. The second point: **If we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.** We live our lives in constant companionship with Jesus and his power. And this is the third point: **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.** No matter how severe the terror, we triumph in Christ.

Define Christian. Paul does it here. **A Christian finds rest in Jesus.** Amen.