

Can't Help Myself

Romans 7:7-25

We've been talking about it for weeks now: sin; which seems strange because its not something that is a part of our day to day conversations nor is it a subject that any of us really likes to talk about. But maybe that's the point. Maybe its time we talked about it more not as a way to make us feel guilty but as a way of making us more aware. Sin is real – its not pretend. It's not old fashioned or outdated. It is a daily struggle.

The reading for this morning sounds at first like a piece of jibberish, not making any sense. Or the kind of contorted logic that comes to us in riddles, which often prove too challenging to solve. Or a tongue twister meant to trip you up. But when you slow down and take your time, you can hear, you can see that what Paul is trying to do is to paint a detailed portrait. Believers have long asked and searched for the answer to the question: what was the sin with which Paul struggled? It's the kind of question that is asked with a hint of excitement, as if we are about to uncover some undiscovered scandal about the him or at the very least, to discover that he was human just like us. But it's the wrong question entirely. Because when you read these verses in the context of Paul's longer discussion in his letter to the Romans, you will discover that the picture Paul is describing for us is not a picture of himself, it is not a picture of any one sin but it is instead a picture of sin itself. Paul here is writing not only about his own struggle with sin, but Israel's struggle with sin and our sin as well. The common denominator: sin. And part of what makes these verses so very challenging is how realistic they are.

“Once upon a time,” writes Annie Dillard in her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, “an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in his village. “I want to ask you something,” the hunter said. “What's that?” the missionary said. “If I did not know about God and sin,” the hunter said, “would I go to hell?” “No,” the missionary said, “not if you did not know.” “Then why,” asked the hunter, “did you tell me?”¹ While we might be sympathetic to this kind of logic, it's not as though God and sin fail to exist if no one tells us about them. The struggle, the tension that the Apostle Paul writes about here in Romans 7, the tension between the Law and sin, has been around almost since the very beginning. There was nothing

wrong with the Law in itself, Paul wants to make that clear. It wasn't as though the Law were in any way bad. It is important for us to remember that it was God who gave the Law in the first place. The Law, which we tend to think of as the 10 commandments, though it was more extensive than just those 10, had been given to Israel as a gift, a part of the covenant, meant to enable Israel to live well in their covenant relationship with God and with one another. And I want to emphasize the Apostle Paul's point here – there was nothing wrong with the Law, nothing flawed, nothing inherently evil about the law but still evil was lurking. Although the Law had not been formally given or written and the word for sin had not even been uttered. Still, from the very beginning, you can see the tension. From the moment that God told Adam and Eve that they could have the fruit of every tree in the garden except that one, you know it was all that they wanted. It wasn't the boundary itself that was the problem; sin was alive in the temptation to cross the boundary. And Adam and Eve were the first to famously trademark that phrase later made popular by comedian Flip Wilson, "The devil made me do it." Of course, the devil, or the serpent didn't actually make them do it, though he did make it sound very enticing. Still, they gave in to the tension: they just couldn't stop themselves.

It's easy, I think, to look at Adam and Eve, as some kind of pre-historic cave dwellers, Neanderthals who dragged their knuckles along the ground, unevolved, unenlightened; to dismiss them as dimwitted and thickheaded. Not the brightest. Even the Apostle Paul – look how far civilization has come since the Roman Empire ruled the world, she said with tongue in cheek. We point to the great gap of time and progress as a means of indicating how much more knowledgeable, sophisticated, informed and educated we are as a means of distancing ourselves from the crudeness of their ways. Of course, we would never fall for a trap like that forbidden fruit trick. We would never be so easily tricked or misled. What do you do when we see a sign that say "Wet Paint?" Okay, so even if we were ticked or misled, of course, we would be able to stop ourselves from going any further, to turn things around, to fix it. Right? How many times have you heard someone say, "just this once?"

True confessions. I was cranky. There's no use pretending or trying to pretty it up. I tried both of those already! It still didn't help. I told everyone, even the dog, that they were the ones being difficult, obstinate, rude. But at the end of the day, there was only one common denominator; me. I did try to turn my attitude and behaviour around. I made a meal I knew they

both loved. I bought yellow tulips for the table to lift my mood. I even walked the dog. Still, I just couldn't help myself. In my defense, I did have a pain in my neck and I know what you are thinking; Kirk. But that's not it. See, even there, I just couldn't help myself, throwing poor Kirk under the bus for the sake of a moment of humor. I did have a legitimate pain in my neck; its been there for 2 and a half weeks now and because of it I haven't been sleeping very well and because of that, I've been crankier than usual. So, you see, I've got a reason for being over tired. But what I don't have is an excuse for taking it out on the ones I say I love the most.

I don't know why I didn't think of it before now. But that kink in my neck, it's more than physical. It's spiritual. Throughout the Old Testament, God often referred to his people as stiff-necked, at least 18 times. It wasn't a compliment and none of those stiff necked people were referred to a chiropractor. Stiff-necked is a metaphor for stubbornness. The words stubborn or stubbornness appear an additional 37 times. You can hear the relationship between being described as stiff-necked and stubbornness in the prophet of Jeremiah who wrote in chapter 17:23, "Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were **stiff-necked** and would not listen or respond to discipline." Stiff-necked or stubborn, these are both just symptoms of a much more serious condition: sin. Our stubbornness is not just that we are difficult to get along with. Our stubbornness is that we refuse to acknowledge the control that sin has over us, we reject the idea that we can't help ourselves and because of that, we continue to struggle, to wrestle with sin. Our stubbornness is that we refuse to cry Uncle, to give in; we refuse to give in not to sin which we give into every day, but to God. Paul captures that struggle so well. It sounds convoluted only because it is so true. Let me read it to you again from Petersen's *The Message*: "For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

²¹⁻²³ It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge."ⁱⁱ As I read this, I am reminded that though I think I am in complete control, master of my own body,

my thoughts, my words, who do I think I'm kidding? I know that I am not. Otherwise, I would be able to prevent myself from misspeaking or stop myself from giving into a bad attitude. Few of us wake up in the morning with intentions to make poor choices. Most of us, most of us just want to get through the day without screwing up too badly. But even the best of intentions can get tripped up by sin. We might try our best to live according to the Law as given by the God who loves us, but what happens? The same thing that happened to Israel when they tried. They did try but every time they tried, sin was waiting right around the corner. They sang hymns and songs, Psalm 119 reads like a love song to the law. But no sooner had they finished singing it and they were swimming in sin all over again. It was a cycle repeated over and over and over again throughout the generations. Living in obedience to God, sin, separation from God, the cry of forgiveness, mercy given, a return to living in obedience to God and the cycle begins again. And again. A very broken cycle.

That's what we are able to see from the vantage point of time. Looking back, what we see is brokenness. That's often what we call sin nowadays. It seems more descriptive. Because we can see the brokenness. Destructive patterns of behaviour, the inability to keep the covenant, the wandering, the stiff-necked stubbornness, the inability for them to help themselves. As we read the Old Testament stories, there are times when it is so frustrating that you just want to shout at them: "Can't you see? You are back on the same treadmill." But not so fast, because we are just like them – not so evolved after all. We are often blind to what's going on in our own time, in our own day to day reality, can't see the cycle of brokenness of which we are a part: of poverty and power struggle, of racism and hatred, of hunger and apathy or how about closer to home: even then we are quick to think of the "big" sins: abuse, violence, addiction, unfaithfulness. But none of these are any bigger than these that live inside of us every day: anger or gossip or jealousy or bitterness or lying or envy or perhaps the biggest one of all, unforgiveness.

So where is the hope? Is there hope? I can't help myself. This much I know. Who can rescue me from sin – that's the question Paul ends this chapter with. Who will rescue me from this cycle of death and self destruction – Jesus. He alone acted to set things right in the midst of that life of contradictions that is me, that is you. Barbara Brown Taylor brought to my attention a small detail in the story of the prodigal son, a story about one who struggled with those same contradictions. The son, who had wasted his life in sin and squalor, finally came to his senses

and returned home. And his father took him in his arms and kissed him. With that kiss, the sin was forgiven, “not because, as Taylor says, the son was innocent”ⁱⁱⁱ but because of the Father’s deep love. Another time, another place, another kiss; in a garden of prayer. Judas kisses Jesus as a sign of friendship and a sign of betrayal. That kiss would become the kiss of death for Jesus. But it also became the kiss of death for our sin – not because we are innocent but because of the Father’s deep love for us. Thanks be to God that His love is greater than our sin. Thanks be to God that we can’t help ourselves but He can and He does.

ⁱ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

ⁱⁱ Eugene Petersen’s *The Message*, Romans 7:17-23

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin*, pg. 6