

# What I Want to Do

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Sunday, July 3, 2005

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Sacrament of Holy Communion

[Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30, "What I Want to Do" Emily Peck, July 3, 2005]

I'd like to tell you what I want to do. Not that you asked, but hey, it is the title of the sermon and you probably saw it in the bulletin and got a little curious, right? On a large scale, I'd like to find the cure for AIDS, solve systemic racism, put an end to violence, and figure out how to really give every child a fair and equal education. Also on the large scale, I was watching TV and saw an ad for the upcoming G8 summit. The ad declared that in three days, eight men have the power to end poverty. My first thought was something along the lines of, "It's 8 men, that's the problem—let's get some women into this decision-making." My second thought was, "That's what I want to do!" I want to end global poverty! Wouldn't we all like to do these things?

As you can tell, I'm drawn to these large-scale problems and the possibility of being involved with their solutions. I do, however, have attachment to smaller scale problems and solutions, too. I want to stop being so wasteful—we're all legally supposed to recycle. But when you're out and about you can easily just throw your empty water bottles away because there aren't recycling bins, only trash cans. On the small scale, I want to carry all my recyclables home. On the small scale, I want to volunteer more. I want to overcome all my bad habits. But enough about me, what about you? What do you want to do? And what are you doing—are you doing what you want to do or not?

In reading the Scripture texts for this week, I realized that I really really wanted to preach on the Paul text. This week's 10 verses from his letter to Romans are so right on! I find a lot of Paul to be right on. He tries so hard to understand the implications of his quite extraordinary, revelatory experience of Christ on the road to Damascus.

And I totally get this. I have a relationship to God who is liberative and just and merciful and loving and mysterious. This relationship has been growing for quite some time; it's had its ups and downs, challenges and triumphs. Sometimes we talk all the time, and I feel really close; sometimes I feel like God's just got other things to be paying attention to and I feel a little abandoned.

The point is this relationship does make a difference my life. Most of those large scale initiatives that I want to do are what I think God wants done. God works on the large scale. God wants to cure AIDS, end poverty and systemic racism, solve every conflict peacefully, etc. I understand that whereas my focus might immediately be pulled to the large scale, I have the capability and responsibility to be involved on the small scale and to really make a difference there.

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We all have that capability and responsibility. How empowering! How weighty! Our goal should be to find true small scale concerns that we can be fully involved in, as we grow to be a better person and a better member of society. That way, we can focus our energies and really do what needs to be done, to play the part we are all able to play in making this world, or city, or family a better one. In order to make that separation, I have to ask for myself and for all of us, "Where is the balance between my small scale and God's large scale?"

Our section of Romans today begins with "I do not understand my own actions for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Don't I know it! Don't we all know it! This is going to come as a surprise, I know, but I am not perfect. In my wanting to do good and to be good, I fail. I don't do what I want to do—just like Paul. I'm reminded of St. Augustine's Confessions. He wrote about his own faults and his own sins and included some prayers, too. My favorite is something along the lines of "God make me chaste, but not yet, I'm not done with my sinning yet—it's a lot of fun!" I really want to be able to do what I want, even the selfish things, and have it not interfere with doing what is good. Like Augustine, I want to be made better by God, but I don't want it to get in the way of having fun and enjoying life.

Today is July third, which means tomorrow is the Fourth of July. I'm just as conflicted over celebrating our country's independence as I am about deciding whether I really always want to do the right thing or not. I have to say, I love this country. I love our Bill of Rights. I love that we're all entitled to the pursuit of happiness, and I think that's just about the coolest thing to include in a government document. I also love the American Dream (whether it's a reality or not!)—that anyone can make it; we all have a chance here. I love the poem on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

However, sometimes our country does the very thing I hate, and I have to take responsibility for those things that are done, as a citizen of this country, as part of the voting public, as a concerned community member. It's done in my name, in all of our names. Sometimes we even profit from it. Sometimes we could help stop it and fail to do so.

What does this country do that you don't feel good about? When you think about what the US could do—what you want it to do but doesn't—what is it? When you

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think about what the US says it wants to do--open its arms to the poor, tired, weak, oppressed and give everyone the chance to succeed in life, be healthy and happy, and achieve their dreams of self-fulfillment—what is it that happens that you hate, that the professed liberative country actually oppresses those who are not white, male, straight, smart, educated? That outsourcing has become commonplace, exploiting workers in foreign countries while jobs are lost here? Phew—our list goes on and on, doesn't it?

Not unlike our own conflict, Paul's letter to Romans is ripe with his inner conflict. What he ends up saying is that there are two laws that he's following—one is God's law and it's the one that guides him to good, and one is the law of sin that he says dwells in his members. What he seeks is rescue from his body of death. In some ways Paul's theology is very easy to understand. I'll help break it down for you: Sin leads to death and righteousness leads to life. That's it. Paul thinks his body leads him to sin, which leads to death; and God, in his inmost self, leads to righteousness which leads to life.

There are some real problems with this boiling down of the big categories of sin and death and righteousness and life. There are some very real problems with thinking that the body leads to sin and the inmost self (soul) leads to righteousness. As a woman, I struggle with body image issues. Let me rephrase that—as a person, I struggle with body image issues. I've learned that some men think about being fit as much as women do. The culture of looking good, which means being thin, and working out in a fabulous New York gym is not limited to my own gender.

The truth is that God created my body and my soul. I read Paul and automatically hear the traditional theological interpretations of his words that have caused all kinds of problems in our Puritan-founded culture. Bodies are not bad things. My soul, embodied, is who I am. I'm not comfortable with the separating of body and soul, uplifting the soul coupled with degrading the body. What I also know is that I can totally relate to Paul, and I can understand coming to this conclusion. I really do want to do what is good, and even so, I fail all the time. I feel this deep desire, deep within, in that place that simply relishes in relationship with God, to do what is good and to be good and to help this world by really loving my neighbor.

And I feel this other desire to just relax and enjoy being alive and not worry with doing what is good at all. You know, *carpe diem*, seize the day! Eat, drink and be merry! Not go to protests, not do volunteer work, not call my brother to make up

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after an argument. Just kinda live at the beach in selfish relaxation working on my tan all summer. How can I be both these things?

It reminds me of our symbol for justice—a blindfolded woman with scales. I understand "justice is blind," but doesn't a blindfold make it very hard to see what's really going on in order to actually do justice? Losing balance seems almost inevitable if we are holding scales while blindfolded. If we are blindfolded how will we be able to tell which of our small concerns will address God's large scale reforms when we work on them?

Our work is a work of balancing. We all want to do good and don't. Like Paul, we all want to be captive to the law of God but enjoy our freedom to chose what to do, and sometimes choose to not follow God's law. It seems to me that what Paul is really suffering from is feeling disconnected from himself. He uses first person—what I want to do—but he talks about his body as if it's completely separate; "my flesh follows this law that I don't have any desire to follow." Paul is just tortured—he can't figure out why he still makes mistakes even though he is connected to God. I remember having a conversation with the youth group about a year ago. A couple of the teenagers informed me that I wasn't allowed to sin because I was a minister. Well. I wish that was true! I wish I were incapable of doing the wrong thing and of separating myself from God because of my vocation.

Paul expects the same thing out of himself; "I experienced God! I was blinded for goodness sake! I shouldn't do anything wrong anymore!" His solution is to understand himself as separated—it must be that part that God can't touch (the flesh) that is still capable of sinning. This is a fairly traditional reading of Paul as a dualist: body vs. soul, bad vs. good, sin vs. life.

Let's complicate that reading for just a second though. The interesting thing is that Paul's body was effected on the road to Damascus. He was made spiritually blind; he was made physically blind. The result of this bodily affliction was that he needed the help of someone else. Someone needed to touch him and open his eyes again. What if the whole idea isn't a separation of body and soul? What if the whole idea is a connection? Paul needs to connect his own spirit to his body. Paul needs to connect himself to communities who are moved by Christ like he is—that's why he writes all these letters.

This makes much more sense to me because God is all about connection. If we are

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connected to God we are also connected to others. If we are connected to others, we are connected to helping them in whatever way God equips and inspires us to. Connection. The whole idea of God and Jesus is connection—people were having difficulty connecting to God and so God decides to come here and connect to us. God, the ultimate Spirit, the ultimate formless, shapeless being, assumes the shape of, becomes incarnate as, a poor guy in the Middle East. This isn't separation of body and soul; this is connection of body and Soul (capital "S").

Like Paul, we all have times of disconnectedness. Times when our bodies are moving around not connecting to people we bump into on the sidewalk; times when our souls are untouched by the plight of homeless folks living on the street; times when we decide not to care about God for just today.

Like Paul, we all have times when we all of a sudden recognize that this is a disingenuous way to live. We do care. Our souls, our depths, our inmost being. We care so deeply that it touches our core. Like Paul, we ask, although maybe not in the same language, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" We reach out. We reach out to God, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit. We reach out to our neighbors who may be able to touch our eyes, lift the blindfold and help us understand the scales that we are holding.