

“All the Way Home”

Over the Independence Day holiday I visited my family in Fredericksburg. Leaving there on Wednesday I realized that I had a list of things that I meant to do, but once again the things that I meant to do I did not do and the things I did not mean to do were the things I had done. As much as I want this anecdote to work with today's reading from Romans it really doesn't. It would be easier if Paul were writing about something trivial like a to-do list instead of much more serious issues.

Why is it that we do things that we do not intend to do, and don't do things that we intend to do? Why is it that we, like Paul, “do not understand [our] own actions”?

My business school economics professors would tell us that we do these things because we are inherently selfish. Even when we learn how to be selfless there is a deeper urge to look out for number one. Economists are not vexed by what bothers Paul, rather they do not understand why we help strangers, tip waiters in airports (after all we are unlikely to ever be served by them again), or give our life to spare another's.

Evolutionary biologists might tell us that the reason you and I are here today is because something in our genetic heritage helped our ancestors survive when others did not. That inherited genetic material is the ghost in the machine that controls us, especially when there is perceived danger or threat to our person, even if the threat is ephemeral.

Paul has another theory, if you will. That is that we know what is good and true, we have good intentions to fulfill those, but sinfulness drives us or tempts us to go in the opposite direction. That ultimately we are sinful, and in the words of Jessica Rabbit, “I'm not bad I'm just drawn that way.”¹

I don't really think that we are inherently selfish. Carl Jung, Richard Rohr and others would tell us that we have to develop a healthy sense of self to survive. A child that doesn't cry when he is hungry might not get fed and thus not survive. But as we mature we realize that our survival depends on more than just our own needs being met.

We live in community and our role in the community requires that we do more than use others for our own purposes. It is important that we care for and support others. Someone may never be able to return our kindness, but if we foster a culture of compassion we will all be much better off. It is that old Golden Rule, “Do to others what you want them to do to you.” Jesus adds, “This is the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets.”² That is, everything that is written in scripture can be boiled down to one simple rule. Take care of others as you would want them to care for you.

¹ “Who Framed Roger Rabbit,” Touchstone Pictures, 1988.

² Matthew 7:12

That is simple enough. But truth be told, the simplest things seem to be the hardest to do. We have heard this teaching at home and in church since we were toddlers but somehow we fail time and again.

How often do we intend to be a more patient and peaceful person and one little irritant causes us to snap and before we know it we are spiraling down into frustration and anger? How often have you said today is the day I will change my attitude and be more upbeat, only to find that the cloud has descended before you get out of the house? Or I will work fewer hours and spend more time with my family and friends only to find that the clock reads 8 p.m. and we are still at work?

We have good intentions, but intentions are not enough. It is not enough to intend to be a better person. You have undoubtedly heard the old saw, "The road to Hades is paved with good intentions." To change what we do, how we treat people, how we treat ourselves, or how we view the world requires more than good intentions. It requires a real change of heart and a change of heart usually does not happen overnight. It takes time, practice, trial and error, and forgiveness. Good intentions are a start, but we need something to sustain us.

Jesus speaks about this in today's Gospel lesson when he says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."³

When oxen are yoked together the stronger of the two never lets the pair go but so far off course. When we are yoked with Jesus there is no question that Jesus is the stronger one and will right our course. When we yoke ourselves to Jesus there is relief from the failure of good intentions. There is a sense that Jesus knows who we are at heart.

Paul's concern and this teaching of Jesus reminds me of a prayer by Thomas Merton, a man who was as zealous for Jesus as Paul was and also as troubled that his impulses were not always to walk with the one to whom he had yoked his life. It is a prayer that comforts us and also helps us realize that it is not all up to us.

Merton wrote:

"My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.

³ Matthew 11:30

Gene LeCouteur
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Richmond, VA

8 a.m. 10 a.m.
July 9, 2017

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”⁴

That is the wisdom of one who is wise enough and intelligent enough to know that it is gentleness and humility of heart, the simple faith of children that leads us down the right path and all the way home.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999] p79.