

To Do Or Not to Do?
Sermon on Romans 7:12-25a Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, July 3, 2005

Perhaps the longest running question in the history of Western philosophy concerns how we define our existence: Are we defined by who we are or by what we do? Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, asked, "To be or not to be?" Socrates, the Greek philosopher said, "To do is to be." Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, said, "To be is to do." Frank Sinatra said, "Doo-be-doo-be-doo." Fred Flintstone said, "Yabba Dabba Doo." And Betty Boop said, "Boop boop be doop." Not to mention, "Scooby dooby doo," Inka Dinka Doo, and Do be a Do Bee, don't be a Don't Bee.

All silliness aside, the question of being and doing is meaningless if people are not free. For the prisoner, the captive, and the slave, there is no possibility of determining who they are or what they shall do because their very existence is defined by a lack of freedom. As many of you know, Senator John McCain was held as a prisoner-of-war for five-and-a-half years during the Viet Nam war. Reflecting on his experience as a captive and his feelings toward other pilots who objected to flying on bombing runs, McCain said, "Once you become a prisoner of war, then you do not have the right to dissent, because what you do will be harming your country." McCain was a man bound to two masters: his captors, who had taken away his physical freedom, and the U.S. military, to whom he was bound by a code of honor as well as law.

The apostle Paul is writing in his letter to the Romans about a similar quandary: The question of what good one can do, for apart from Jesus Christ, he—and you and I—are prisoners. "I delight in the law of God in my inmost self," Paul writes, "but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:22-

24) And so today's sermon has an Independence Day theme and a message about freedom: Freedom won for us not by the sacrifice of valiant soldiers on battlefields past and present, at home and abroad, fields now teeming with the silent white markers of the fallen. Precious as that freedom is, and as costly a toll as it has exacted, our freedom was won for us not by battalions and bombs, ships and swords, or generals and guns, but by Christ and his Cross.

The stand Christ made at Calvary, the final, victorious stand he made against sin and death, is the climax of the God's conflict with the forces of evil that continually threaten our world. Evil is especially pernicious because it both possesses and exercises its capacity to overtake even those means that God ordains for good and subverts them to serve its own ends. The example Paul makes is of the law. The law was given by God to us so that we might know the will of God and how to be in right relationship with God. The law, then, is good. But sin saw an opportunity in the law, and took advantage of it. Sin took hold of the law, overpowered it, and began to use the law for its own ends.

And according to Paul Achtemeier, "What [sin] does to the law it also does to human beings: It takes them, good creatures of God that they are, and enslaves them to its own evil purposes ... so that good creation can no longer do the good it wants to do, and knows it should."¹ This is the dilemma facing Paul when he writes, "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" (Rom. 7:15, 18b-19). "[T]he 'I' here is a way of talking about all of us, humankind, as we find ourselves apart from God's making us right in Jesus Christ."² All of us have sinned, and so the problem of sin is a universal one. All of us need to be rescued from the power that sin has over us.

¹ Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985) 119.

² David L. Bartlett, *Romans*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 69.

David Bartlett points out that Paul is writing about situations “we have all had, apart from Christ, when we want to do one thing and yet end up doing another.” He continues by saying that “The fact that we want to do what is right shows that what is right *is* right. The fact that we don’t do what we want to do shows that there is something even stronger than our principles. That something, says Paul, is sin.”³ The inner self—the part of us that knows and can will to do the good—wants to do what is right, and so proves that the law in itself is good. But the outer or fleshly self—our tongue and brain and hands and feet—does not necessarily cooperate with our good intentions. Rather the flesh obeys sin because ‘the law of sin dwells in our members’ (7:23). And that law of sin is a law we generally obey because the power of sin is a power we cannot break and a force we cannot control.

The problem, then, is not simply a “moral failure,” rather like Texas Rangers’ pitcher Kenny Rogers hitting a water cooler or a cameraman because he cannot do what he knows is right. Kenny, like any Little Leaguer, knows that it is not right to hit people. We are not dealing here with what Paul Achtemeier calls “the paralysis of the good will or the crippling of the ability to discern what is good.”⁴ Knowing and willing what is right are not only possible, but as Paul clearly says, we already do them: Verse 18b, “I can will what is right” and verse 21a, “I want to do what is right.” The problem is with “the total power of sin,” and thus “the inability to do what one knows to be good and therefore wants to do because one is no longer under one’s control.”⁵ We are under the complete control of sin.

If this is not about a moral dilemma, but about the total power of sin over us, then with Paul we must ask, “Who shall rescue [us] from this body of death?” (7:24b) The way out of a moral dilemma is to know the right thing and do it, and so we ask ourselves, “What Would Jesus

³ Bartlett, 70.

⁴ Achtemeier, 122.

⁵ Ibid.

Do?” If you have read Charles M. Sheldon’s classic book, *In His Steps*, you get the impression that the answer to that question is both clear and easy to implement. But this is exactly the problem: we cannot do what Jesus would do apart from Jesus himself. Paul has shown us that apart from Jesus, “I” am not in control, “but sin that dwells within me” (7:20c). I can never do the good I know and want to do because I am not in control, but powerless against the sin that dominates my life. Only a power stronger than sin can rescue me, can rescue us, from our enslavement to sin and its power.

What can protect us from sin? What can save us from sin’s power? Not good intentions. Not the law. Not the power of positive thinking. Not going deep down to the core of the human spirit. As Paul Achtemeier proclaims, “Only Christ has broken the power of sin. Only Christ can free us from that power. Only Christ can deliver us to a new life in which the Spirit of God can work his will.”⁶ We will never be able to do the good we know and want to do so long as we are slaves to sin and prisoners of its power. But “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25), sin’s power has been broken by the cross. We are freed from sin’s enslavement by God’s liberating act in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so we joyfully celebrate our independence—our freedom from sin and its power over us. We proudly pledge our allegiance to the Lord whose sacrifice made the victory possible. We humbly commit ourselves to be who God calls us to be and to do what God calls us to do in our baptism. And we gratefully give thanks to God, “who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:57). Amen.

⁶ Achtemeier, 124.