

“The Devil Made Me Do It”
Romans 7:15-25a; Psalm 124

On April 22 of this year, police charged Ingmar Guandique, an illegal immigrant from El Salvador, currently serving a prison sentence for assaulting two other women, with the death of Chandra Levy. Some of you will recall the Chandra Levy case. The attractive, twenty-three year old Washington intern disappeared without a trace in the spring of 2001. The story simultaneously drew and repelled us. The mystery of her vanishing pricked our inquisitive natures. The heartbreak and emotional stress of such a search resonated with every parent. Watching her mother and father on television generated both sympathy and horror within each of us.

But, like any major story, this one carried side bars that increased its visibility and unwanted consequences. At the center of the search’s storm stood Gary Condit, U.S. representative from California. The son of a revival preacher, Condit learned his techniques, cynics would say shtick, on the saw dust trail of revival meetings. The conservative district he represented was often called Condit Country, signifying both his hold on his constituent’s favor and his penchant for expressing and symbolizing their values and beliefs.

A strong proponent of what is commonly called “family values,” he vehemently denounced the sexual sins of Bill Clinton. After repeatedly denying anymore than a friendship with Ms. Levy, he finally admitted an affair. And this confession came only because other women began sprouting up with tales of his marital infidelity. Through the years, as he aggressively denounced and castigated America for its loss of family values, he was at the same time being a part of that loss. Though we found his adultery with a twenty-three year old woman appalling, our outrage, and cause for media attention, was that his desire to protect himself from embarrassment could have hindered the discovery of Ms. Levy. Though never charged with any crime, in 2002 he lost his bid for re-election.

But that being said, as Christians we should not find his behavior surprising. Most are aware that through the centuries younger women and powerful men have discovered a mutual attraction. Yet, a stir still occurs when a person espousing religious faith is discovered not matching his words and actions. But, the Bible tells us this battle between our faith and our sin engages in the life of every Christian. As the Apostle Paul so descriptively expresses it: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

Now, early on, this passage in Romans stirred controversy. From the early Greek Church fathers to Augustine in the fourth century, Christian scholars argued whether Paul wrote this section about his pre-Damascus Road life, before he was changed by Christ, or whether this is the way a Christian lives. Arguments have flown back and forth, as they still do today. When Paul describes our struggle to do what is right, is he alluding to the non-Christian, or is he documenting how

Christians attempt to live faithfully? Some point to other passages in Romans, and other Pauline letters, noting how Paul describes the Christian life in terms of reconciliation, peace, and victory. Others counter by observing that Paul wrote this passage in the first person, present tense, making it autobiographical.

The New Testament is very clear that following Jesus Christ changes us. The Holy Spirit works within the life of a Christian to enable him or her to choose good over evil. Yet, the Bible also makes it plain that we are all sinners, and continue to be sinners, our salvation not brought about by our deeds, which are always inadequate, but by the unmerited love and forgiveness of a gracious God.

An example of this dilemma is found in Methodism. Using scriptures indicating that Jesus can enable us to thwart sin, Methodism popularized a doctrine called sanctification, or entire sanctification, or some used the term Christian perfection. Employing plentiful scripture references they said a Christian, through Christ working in his or her life, could quit sinning, become like Jesus. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in the eighteenth century wrote a book entitled, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection. I don't recommend this book unless you are having trouble sleeping at night. But in it he attempts to biblically establish the doctrine of Christian perfection, then references individuals whom he cites as evidence of the doctrine in action. But what is so interesting is that Wesley never claims Christian perfection for himself.

Now, you will hear Methodists speak about Christian perfection about as much as you hear Presbyterians propound predestination. And for good reason, taking these doctrines to their logical conclusions creates beliefs the Bible does not proclaim, and even condemns.

A middle-aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near death experience. During that experience she sees God and asks if this is it. God says no and explains that she has another thirty years to live.

Upon her recovery she decides to just stay in the hospital and have a face lift, liposuction, tummy tuck, etc. She even has someone come in and change her hair color. She figures since she has another thirty years, she might as well make the most of it.

She walks out of the hospital after the last operation and is killed by an ambulance speeding up to the hospital. She arrives at the Pearly Gates and complains to God: "I thought you said I had another thirty years."

God replies, "I didn't recognize you."

When we stretch and manipulate scripture to fit our systems of logic and thought, it can become so unrecognizable it carries spiritual death instead of life.

So where does this leave us?

In other places Paul proclaims the Christian a "new creature" in Jesus Christ. Our thoughts, words and actions are transformed. And yet here he writes, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." So, which is it? Do

we become a new creature in Christ or remain a fallen sinner? The answer is, “Yes.” We are both.

In this passage, Paul is describing the struggle every Christian fights every day, our battle to live holy and righteous lives, the conflict between right and wrong that swirls within everyone of us. Our rational thought patterns always want everything to be either/or, black or white, right or wrong.” But that is not how human beings function. Some of the most wonderful, God fearing people have done terrible things. Only Jesus was perfectly sinless, and scenes such as the Garden of Gethsemane remind us He, too, struggled to do what was right.

Look at Representative Gary Condit. We were repulsed by his hypocritical womanizing while he piously proclaimed the politically advantageous theme of “family values.” But at the same time, his constituents could tell stories of wonderful assistance when they needed help, sometimes sending his own staff to buy groceries for shut-ins.

Or, remember when Jimmy Carter was running for president and he did an interview with Playboy magazine. And, of course, the only element that received any attention was Carter admitting that he had committed adultery in his heart. Otherwise, in seeing a beautiful woman he had a bad thought. There was this outcry over how this professing Christian could have a thought like that.

Well, “Duh.” Every red-blooded American male over the age of twelve knew exactly what Carter was talking about.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul is describing how we live our lives. Our beliefs, thoughts, and actions are not consistent. Paul is not saying he never did what was right. Of course, he did, a lot. He is testifying to the struggle each Christian experiences when trying to do it.

Now, there is an element of comfort here. Even the great Apostle Paul admits to a Jekyll and Hyde spiritual personality. So when we share Jimmy Carter’s experience or, see how easy it would be to fudge our income tax return, or ask ourselves if God really needs a significant portion of our income, or can hardly wait to spread that gossip we heard at the club, this passage reminds us that Christians have struggled with these choices right from the very beginning.

But the comfort also resides in the context of a warning. Every one of us will have to fight these battles, no exceptions, not even Paul. And, if they are not fought, we will lose. And then, we will truly do the things we do not, and should not, want to do.

An airline pilot hammered his plane into the runway really hard. The airline had a policy which required the first officer to stand at the door while the passengers exited, smile, and give them a “Thanks for flying XYZ airline.” He said that in light of his bad landing, he had a hard time looking the passengers in the eye, thinking that someone would have a smart comment.

Finally, everyone had gotten off except for this little old lady walking with a cane. She said, “Sonny, mind if I ask you a question?”

“Why no, Ma’am,” said the pilot, “what is it?”

The little old lady said, “Did we land or were we shot down?”

Often, people think being a Christian should produce a life of smooth landings. But Paul reminds us that the Christian existence contains a struggle with sin that can make it seem like we’re often being shot down.

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

These words bring comfort to our hearts since they describe our struggles. But they could also foster discouragement as we wonder how in the world we will ever overcome the sin that so threatens us. Yet, Paul concludes this section with these words: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

When we commit ourselves to following Jesus Christ, like the Apostle Paul’s meeting with Christ on the Damascus Road, our lives can be transformed. Our love of Christ, and devotion to Him, allow the Holy Spirit to work with us. The Holy Spirit is the part of God indwelling within the life of every Christian. The Spirit gives us the strength and power to resist evil, to make godly decisions. This doesn’t mean we become sinless. The temptation to harm with gossip, to be mean spirited, to be petty remain ever present. But when we truly strive to be like Jesus, God helps us. There is a strength, power, presence available to those who desire it.

Day to day human existence is a minefield of choices. Jesus helps us set a course that enables us to know what most of those choices should be. The security of God’s love and forgiveness motivate us to live for Him. Most often, we know what is the right thing to do. But only God can give us the strength to do it. Martin Luther once said the Christian is at the same time righteous and sinful. Our faith in Christ, our decision to follow Him, enables us to lean our lives toward the righteous side.

There was an engineer who had an exceptional gift for fixing all things mechanical. After serving his company loyally for over thirty years, he happily retired. Several years later the company contacted him regarding a seemingly impossible problem they were having with one of their multimillion dollar machines. They had tried everything and everyone else to get the machine to work but to no avail. In desperation, they called on the retired engineer who had solved so many of their problems in the past.

The engineer reluctantly took the challenge. He spent a day studying the huge machine. At the end of the day, he marked a small “x” in chalk on a particular component of the machine and stated, “This is where your problem is”. The part was replaced and the machine worked perfectly again.

The company received a bill for \$50,000 from the engineer for his service. Shocked, they demanded an itemized accounting of his charges. The engineer responded: One chalk mark, \$1. Knowing where to put it, \$49,999.

Our lives are extremely complicated. But knowing that an allegiance to Jesus will make it all work is priceless.

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A common response as each of us experiences the Apostle Paul’s dilemma of knowing what is right, and yet doing the exact opposite.

The Christian life is not easy. One’s decision to follow Christ does not make everything hunky dory. Trauma and tragedy still find us. The dilemma of choosing between right and wrong still confront us. And sometimes, we still choose poorly.

Do not be discouraged says the Apostle Paul. I know exactly how you feel. We all do. But God will help us. He loves us. He forgives us. He sent part of Himself, His Holy Spirit, to help us.

This morning, recalling how we so often do what we do not want to do, let each one of us dedicate ourselves to following Jesus Christ, who came so that we might live in the midst of such love and forgiveness that we begin to act, think, and choose like Jesus Himself.

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