

“Christian Anonymous”

Romans 7:15-25a

Sermon

9/1/19

I do not understand my own actions. For I do the very thing I hate.

Perhaps these are strange words with which to open a sermon. Where are they leading? They sound negative and therefore not life giving. Generally speaking they are not where I want to begin a sermon. But for many reasons, they are exactly where I want to begin. The words are anguished and address issues the apostle Paul is facing. He is discovering that it is not easy to hold fast to what we deem is important. We are buffeted from within and without by forces we do not always understand.

Any of you out there who are Star War fans will remember ***The Revenge of the Sith***. In it, the young Anakan Skywalker, a young warrior, who is committed to high ideals compromises those very ideals. He has been reared in living for the light side of the force yet he turns to the dark side and becomes Darth Vader. He does so against every instinct and every ounce of training he has had. Why? You’ll have to ask someone else or see a rerun of the movie. I am not going to be a spoiler. But let me say, that he would have understood Paul. ***I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.***

Even though we know the mandate of Jesus, even though we have committed ourselves to living accordingly, we often do ***the very thing we hate***. We often feel pressure from various sources to do what we do not want to do.

My country, right or wrong is a noble sounding conviction. Yet past and current history reminds us of some horrible behavior and policies that we have learned to accept. It reminds us how often we have learned to hate and fear others because they are our enemy. They are different than we are and therefore deemed dangerous.

We want to succeed or, at the very least, do our best. Again a noble aspiration. But often doing so has come at the expense of the very family we want to care for. We do not understand our own actions.

Paul speaks for us. The ways we wander, as it were to *the dark side* may differ from his. But we know how easy it is to move away from good intentions. The other

day an article appeared in the news. It was about a public figure suggesting that words be added to *The New Colossus*.

The poem is found at the base of The Statue of Liberty and was written by a Jewish immigrant. It was a poem I once memorized. But, as some of you will acknowledge, the memory is not as it once was.

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
with conquering limbs astride from land to land;
here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand
a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she with silent lips.
“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-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

In recalling these words I had to wonder about the disconnect between vision and reality.

I read about families separated by immigration policies that originate in fear and mistrust. And I wonder do we really mean *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free....*

I hear of people living in abject poverty in our own state, one of the wealthiest in the nation, where do the words fit in, what do they mean? *Give me...the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*

When I know people who would lock our borders, all of whose roots are traced to earlier immigrants, what do they hear in these words? *Send these the homeless, the tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

On so many levels, it is easy to turn to the dark side. As Christians, it is easy to compromise our ideals, easy to go along with the crowd. It is easy to identify with

Paul's anguish. ***I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.***

We cross to the dark side so often we have become invisible as followers of Jesus. We have largely become irrelevant because we dwell in the darkness.

We say we follow Jesus. How would anyone know? If our light does not shine, or if it is under the bushel what good is it? If we simply blend in, we become invisible and anonymous.

We do the very things we hate. With Paul we seek a way out. In different words, we say with Paul, ***Wretched one that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*** Paul is clear in his answer. It is through the grace of God that we move into the light, that allows us to do the thing we want to do, to be the people we want to be. It is through God's grace that we find our voice and say no to all that is wrong.

No to hunger! No to homelessness! No to discrimination! No to exclusion of others! No to war! No to a narrow minded patriotism! No to all that does not reflect the love of God made known in Jesus!

We can say no to the dark and yes to the light. Paul is not blindly idealistic. He is aware of the struggle between the dark side and the light side. Hear his words of affirmation.

***What then are we to say about these things?
If God be for us, who is against us?***

...

***Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?***

...

No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We can be all Jesus calls us to be to the extent that we rely on God's grace, rather than our own good intentions.

Specifically we turn to prayer and reflection on God's word to us, despite anything the world might say differently. If, and when, we do we will no longer be members of *Christians Anonymous*. Rather we will be those who live in the awareness that *nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. We will no longer do what we hate and instead we will do what we love. We will be followers of and dwellers in the Light.

Amen