

“Life in the Holy Spirit, Part 1 of 3: Surrender”

A Homily by The Rev. Gary Coffey, Grace Church, Asheville, NC 7/16/17

Last week I mentioned that someone said to me recently that we don't talk much about sin in the Church anymore. I also mentioned that we usually think of sin in the negative, as a failure to obey God's Laws, and that is one definition of sin. However, the word sin is derived from an archery term which means missing the mark or missing the bullseye or perhaps even missing the target. When we think of sin that way, another way of looking at sin is missing the blessing that God has for us.

At one of the services last week, I talked about this stinging plant that inflicts a terrible sting if you brush up against it. Choosing to sin in our lives is like choosing to leave God's path for us and walking out through those terrible stinging plants.

I also mentioned that it's no wonder that Jesus taught us to call God Father because a loving parent wants what is best for his or her children. Parents come up with rules for their children, not to make them miserable, but to keep them safe, and to help them flourish as human beings. A parent will insist that the child does not play near the edge of a cliff, not to interfere with the fun the child is having, but to keep the child out of danger.

Parents take their children to church, again, not to interfere with their playtime, but to help them grow in their knowledge and love of God, and to nourish their spirits.

Likewise, our heavenly Parent did not come up with the Ten Commandments to restrict us, but to ensure our safety and to help us grow as individuals in communities of faith who worship and serve and honor God together. When we sin, or violate God's commandments, we put ourselves at risk because of our disobedience.

When we seek to walk in God's way, Jesus taught us that we will find the joy and the abundant life which God has for every one of us.

Looking at Romans chapter 6 last week, we heard St. Paul talk about how we become “enslaved” or habituated to whatever path we are following, the path of sin or the path of righteousness.

We then looked at Romans 7 last week and heard St. Paul lamenting over the struggle to obey God and stay on God’s path. He said that the very thing he wanted to do, he did not do. And the very thing that he did not want to do, he found himself doing. He said that with his inmost self, he wanted to serve Christ, but that there was something else at work in him which he called sin which caused him at times to do the very thing that he hated. He finally cries out, “Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” He then answers his own question by saying, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Isn’t it true that St. Paul is describing the struggle all of us have? We are so thankful for all that God has done for us. We are so thankful for all that God has given us and provided for us. We are so thankful for the forgiveness and peace that we have found in giving our lives to Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who came to save the world. However, we still struggle, don’t we? Like Paul, we find ourselves not doing what we want to do, at least at times, and doing the very thing that we don’t want to do at other times. How do we get this help which St. Paul says that we have in Christ Jesus?

St. Paul tells us how to get the help we need from God to avoid sin and pursue righteousness in Romans 8, our reading for today. Sometimes Romans 8 is called a chapter on Life in the Holy Spirit. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson calls Romans 8, ‘The Solution is Life on God’s Terms’. This is the solution to being torn between wanting to serve God and seemingly not being able to because of our choosing the way of sin over the way of righteousness, or choosing our way over God’s way.

Romans 8 shows us that there is another way than the way of constant struggle which St. Paul described in Romans 7. We read the translation from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* today because it is so much easier for us to understand than is the NRSV which we usually read in church.

We began with the last few lines in Romans 7 to remind ourselves what St. Paul is doing in Romans 8. I would like to read this passage again carefully with you. I would like to invite your comments as we go.

Please look with me now at the Reading from Romans in your bulletins. Beginning with Romans 7:24, we read:

²⁴ I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

²⁵ The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

⁸ ¹⁻² With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death.

³⁻⁴ God went for the jugular when he sent his own Son. He didn't deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that.

The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.

Living the Christian life is not about trying harder, but about surrender to God. That's the difference between Law and Gospel! It would not have been very good news if Christ came and said, "Y'all are just going to have to suck it up and try harder to keep the Law. That didn't work for St. Paul and it won't work for us. Rather, Christ is saying, "Open yourself to God's Holy Spirit and allow God to do His work in you. Allow God to remake you from the inside out. Allow the Spirit to change your heart. Surrender!"

I was reminded of the hymn, Have Thine Own Way, Lord. The first verse goes like this: “Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way. Thou art the potter. I am the clay. Mold me and make me, after thy will. While I am waiting, yielded and still.”

“Mold me and make me, after thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still.”

“Yielded and still, awaiting the Spirit’s work within us.”

In my early twenties, I was seeking God. I went through a rough time personally, and God led me to a community of Christians of all different stripes and denominations that were living the Christian life differently than I had ever seen it lived, even though I had been in the Church all of my life. God literally rebuilt my life in the midst of this joyful group of Christians.

These folks had a contagious joy and love about them that I had never seen in anyone. There was also an open welcome and lack of judgment that I had not seen in many Christians that I had known previously.

Come to find out, this community of Christians had discovered and embraced the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives and it was the presence of the Holy Spirit in that community that had changed their lives and made all of the difference. They had discovered that being a Christian was not about trying harder, but rather simply yielding, surrendering to the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ within them.

Continuing now with verses 5-11,

⁵⁻⁸ Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God’s action in them find that God’s Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn’t pleased at being ignored.

⁹⁻¹¹ But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won’t know what we’re

talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God’s terms. It stands to reason, doesn’t it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he’ll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ’s!

Going back to St. Paul’s description of our struggle, remember how he said in last week’s passage, “For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members (or in my body) another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members (in my body). Then Paul cries out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Now, listen again to what we just heard in Romans 8. “When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Christ Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With HIS Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ’s!” So, Beloved, who will deliver us from this body of death? The answer is the God’s Holy Spirit which lives in us. And the result is transformation, God working in us, doing what we cannot do for ourselves, no matter how hard we try.

Continuing with verses 12-14,

¹²⁻¹⁴ So don’t you see that we don’t owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There’s nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God’s Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go. [The Message](#) Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

In closing,

Years and years ago when my son Jarod was about the age that his daughter is now, maybe 12 or 13 years old, someone gave me two tickets to, I think it’s called, a tractor pull and mud run. It was held indoors at the Five Seasons Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which is like our Civic Center.

When we got there, somehow in the center of that arena, they had created a long mud hole, basically. The mud was probably 18 -24 inches deep. The idea of the

tractor pull was to hook these tractors with these hugely modified hot rod engines to what looked like a big heavy metal sled, and then to see how far these tractors could pull through this sled through the mud. Kind of like a long jump event in the Olympics, they would measure how far each vehicle could make it through the mud.

Also, they had all kinds of four wheel drive vehicles which ran in different classes according to weight and horsepower which would see how far they could make it through this mud. So, both the tractors and the vehicles would rev their engines up, and go as hard as they could until they got stuck in the mud.

As someone who has had an interest in auto racing, I would say that this was the biggest waste of fuel and of horsepower that I had ever witnessed. And secondly, it was pretty boring. Imagine, sitting there and watching vehicle after vehicle getting stuck in the mud and having to be pulled out of the mud so that the next vehicle could get stuck in the mud. The only upside to this whole thing was spending time with my son.

So, they did this for a long time, (it seemed like forever), one vehicle after the next getting stuck, and then getting pulled out of the mud.

But finally, something exciting happened. They got to the highest class of these vehicles. I think they were powered by nitro methane. The tire tread looked more like paddles than tire tread. They gave the signal for the first one of these vehicles to make its way into the mud. You hear its engine rev up, WAAAHHHHH, and the next thing you know the driver of that vehicle is locking his brakes down to keep from hitting the arena wall on the other side of the mud!

It was a little like Jesus walking on the water. The mud pit didn't even slow this vehicle down. Those paddle tires basically just kept it on top of the mud and then it flew out the other side. I was never more surprised by anything in my life!

What Romans chapter 8 is describing is the choice that you and I as followers of Jesus have between living life like all those previous vehicles in that arena, exhausting ourselves under our own power until we mire down in the cares and challenges of life OR

Living a Spirit-empowered existence where we depend on God to get us through the mud and muck of life's challenges and difficulties.

And it just about boils down to whether or not we choose to accept God's help to live this life, OR we say to God, "Please! I'd rather do it myself!"

If you are tired of trying to do it yourself in your life with God, and are ready to hand yourself over to God and the The Holy Spirit, for God's help, then I would invite you to join me in singing together, "Have Thine Own Way" as your heartfelt prayer to God this morning.

1. Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter. I am the clay!
Mold me and make me, after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.
2. Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way!
Search me and try me, Master, today!
Purer than snow, Lord, wash me just now,
As in thy presence, humbly I bow.
3. Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way!
Wounded and weary, help me I pray!
Power all power surely is thine!
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine!
4. Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way!
Hold o'er my being Absolute sway!
Fill with thy Spirit 'til all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me!