

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Proper 9, Year A, July 9, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“The Burden of Faith”
Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

in our Romans reading today we see a side of Paul that makes him look like a pastoral counselor; a pastoral counselor is a person who has dual training as both a psychologist and as a theologian; and by the way, most clergy do not have the professional training of a psychologist, therapist, or social worker, so while we can “counsel” people spiritually, we cannot actually do “counseling;” we are required to refer parishioners to those who do have that additional professional training; Paul seems to have both of these areas covered

Paul the psychologist is easy to understand; he has taken careful notice of his own actions, his feelings, his will power—his lack of will power, his motivations, and has recognized how these traits seem to apply to most other people too; they are traits so common as to be part of our human nature; and don’t his words resonate with us when he says thing like: “I do not understand my own actions;” “I do not do what I want” to do; “I do [things] I do not want” to do...; even if we don’t feel this way all the time, I doubt any one of us has never felt this way

Paul the theologian is harder to understand; he wrestles with the motivations behind his and our actions; in his musings about “law” and “flesh” he is trying to find language that is understandable to both Jews and Greeks, since most of the churches he is dealing with, and writing to, are made of of both groups; I’m not sure he does a good job here of finding understandable common ground that also makes sense for us

it’s OK to find him a bit obscure and to not feel sure about what he’s getting at; even Peter has difficulty with Paul’s writings; in 2nd Peter (3:16) he admits that “there are some things in [Paul’s] letters hard to understand;” that’s reassuring for us, and what Peter says is true about many other parts of the Bible, too; so many things in it are either difficult to understand, or difficult to even know why they are there—including several things that have come up in recent Sundays that we have had difficult questions about in our Bible study group; a couple of years ago I reread the entire Bible through from start to

finish, using the Daily Bible Challenge, and was often left scratching my head about some of the things that are deeply troubling in the Bible's words and in the actions it recounts; that is why we study it and wrestle with its meanings, and do not just take everything it says at face value

Paul's picture of the human condition is bleak; this life is shot because of sin, with our only hope coming from Jesus who can rescue us; certainly Jesus is the one who ultimately saves us; but what about things you or I can do, now, to keep our lives on track?; if we want an answer from Paul, we have to look elsewhere, as it is not in today's passage, and turn to one of his other epistles; in Philippians (4:12-13) he says this, "I have learned the secret ... I can do all things through him [Christ/Lord/God] who strengthens me;" this is key; our only way of overcoming our difficulties in life is not to try and handle them all by ourselves, through our own smarts and our own efforts; the way of overcoming our difficulties in life is to apply our smarts and our efforts with and through God, with and through Christ, with and through the Holy Spirit

and how do we do that?; by using all of the tools given to us through Christian tradition: study the Bible and other devotional literature, worship with the gathered community and pray on our own time, and by calling upon the support and fellowship of the church; these aren't new ideas; we should all be familiar with how important these activities are; but maybe there is something that keeps us from taking full advantage of all of these tools that are otherwise so readily available to us; could it be that we think it's too hard to engage ourselves deeply in a committed religious life?; is it that we're afraid it would be too hard, so we don't really try?; do we think it would be too much of a burden to undertake these kinds of things seriously, consistently, daily?

well, our Gospel reading today addresses that very idea of a "burden," so let's look at it; Jesus says, in familiar and comforting words, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light;" Jesus says he's not a burden to us, that any efforts we might make to "see him more clearly, to love him more dearly, to follow him more nearly, day by day"—as you may recall the lyrics from the musical and film *Godspell*—these things actually lighten our lives, rather than burden them

Jesus says, “Come to me;” that’s not a one-time invitation, that once you’ve been baptized or joined a church you’re all set; “Come to me” is a daily invitation that requires a daily response from us; “Come to me” requires a daily response in our minds, in our hearts, and in our actions

Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you... for my yoke is easy, my burden is light;” he lifts our burdens from us, by helping us to set our priorities right and by helping us to see our world from a different perspective than our own; from the bigger perspective; from God’s perspective

Jesus says, “learn from me” about how to care for yourself and how to care for other people—especially how to care for those people who don’t have anyone else to care for them; caring for others focuses us on bigger concerns than our own

and finally, Jesus says, do these things “and you will find rest for your souls;” that doesn’t mean you won’t be busy; that doesn’t mean you won’t still have difficulties in life; that doesn’t mean you’ll have easy answers for everything; what it does mean is that you will find—in the midst of busyness, in the midst of difficulties, in the midst of uneasy answers—through your relationship with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit, that you will find rest in your soul; that’s really what Paul longed for; don’t we all long for that too?; with Paul we recognize that Jesus is our rescue; with Paul we celebrate our rescue—“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”