

Romans 7:15-25a

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

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I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good... 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. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

I have always loved that Paul had the courage to tell the truth. Because if we're honest, most of us have spent at least part of our lives trying very hard to convince everyone else-and maybe even ourselves-that we've got it all together. Paul doesn't. Paul simply tells the truth. "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." I wonder if Paul would have understood Taylor Swift. A couple of years ago she released a song called *Anti-Hero*. It became one of the biggest songs in the world. I don't think it became a hit simply because it's catchy. I think it became a hit because millions of people heard someone telling the truth. She sings: *I have this thing where I get older but just never wiser...I should not be left to my own devices...They come with prices and vices...I end up in crisis...It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me...* Now, I doubt Taylor Swift was trying to write a commentary on Romans chapter 7. But Paul would have recognized every word. Different millennium. Different vocabulary. Same dilemma. Same human heart. The habits we cannot seem to escape. The words we promised ourselves we would never say again. The same old arguments. The same old wounds. The same old loneliness. Paul names all of it with breathtaking honesty.

1800 yrs after Paul, the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground*, one of the first great existentialist novels. Its narrator, known simply as the Underground Man, is painfully self-aware. He watches himself doing the very things that destroy him and then watches himself doing them again and again and again.

Listen to him: *"I got to the point of feeling a sort of secret, abnormal, despicable enjoyment in returning home... acutely conscious that that day I had committed a loathsome action again, that what was done could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at myself for it, tearing and consuming myself till at last the bitterness turned into a sort of shameful, accursed sweetness, and at last-into positive real enjoyment!... I kept wanting to know whether other people felt such enjoyment."* What an extraordinary confession. He's describing something many of us know but rarely admit. Not just making mistakes. But getting trapped in the cycle. Doing the thing we hate. Hating ourselves for doing it. And then somehow finding ourselves doing it all over again.

Paul. Dostoevsky. Taylor Swift. Three voices separated by 2000 years. But they all point to the same truth-we cannot rescue ourselves. This is exactly where people in recovery begin. The First Step of Alcoholics Anonymous says: *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol-that our lives had become unmanageable.* That may be the most offensive sentence in our culture. Because we have been taught that strength means taking control. That maturity means self-sufficiency. That freedom means independence. Scripture says something much stranger. Freedom begins the moment we stop pretending we are in control. Some of the holiest moments of my own life have not been moments when I became stronger. Some of the holiest moments of my life happened when I finally stopped fighting. I don't even know that "giving up" is the right phrase. Giving up sounds like defeat. This feels more like giving in. Giving in to grace. Giving in

to reality. Giving in to the possibility that God could do what I could not. This is where Paul finally arrives. After all his frustration. After all his honesty. After all his despair. He cries, *"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* And then comes one of the shortest and most beautiful answers in all of Scripture. *"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."* Not, "I figured it out." Not, "I finally became disciplined enough." Not, "I tried harder." Paul's answer isn't an explanation. It's Jesus.

Maybe this is what surrender is. But the truth is that we often love the idea of surrender more than the practice of it. We want God to clean up our mess before we ever have to acknowledge it. We want resurrection without death. Freedom without powerlessness. Grace without honesty. But that's not how grace works. Grace meets us precisely where we stop pretending we can rescue ourselves. An old preacher used to say, "Somewhere along the way, God interrupts us with his scandalous grace."

I think my father knew something about that scandalous grace. My dad's name was Napoleon Rowell. That's a lot of name for a Black boy born in Rock Hill, South Carolina, in 1928. My father died more than 40 years ago at the age of 57. His death certificate says complications from diabetes. The truer answer is that my father died of alcoholism. And I remember those drinking years as though they were yesterday. Children who grow up in homes like mine learn something that no child should ever have to learn. We learn the sound of footsteps. There are sober footsteps. And there are drunk footsteps. You could tell before the front door even opened. But somewhere along the way that story changed. The last 7 years of my father's life, he didn't drink. The family story is that he quit cold turkey. He never talked about it. I wish I had been aware enough to ask him what happened. But my holy imagination wonders if somewhere along the way my father stopped fighting. I wonder if somewhere along the way he surrendered. I wonder if somewhere along the way he discovered what Paul discovered. That he could not rescue himself. Whatever happened...something changed. My father wasn't much of a churchgoer. That was my mother's world. My grandparent's world. But my father was the church's chef. He was a professional chef, and to this day, I think he was the best cook I've ever known. If there was a wedding...my father cooked. A funeral...my father cooked. A church anniversary...my father cooked. 20 people. 150 people. It didn't matter. Napoleon Rowell made things delicious. People today talk about love languages. My father almost never said, "I love you." He didn't have to. His love language was feeding people. Looking back now, I sometimes wonder if that became his amends to the world. Not speeches. Not explanations. Meals. Collards. Fried Chicken. Potato salad. Peach cobbler. My daddy made sure people left church well fed. He nourished their bodies. And I think he nourished their souls.

In just a few moments, we will come to another table. We don't come because we have finally gotten our lives together. We come because somewhere along the way we got hungry. Somewhere along the way we got weary. Somewhere along the way we found out we cannot rescue ourselves. The Eucharist is not a prize for people who have mastered life. It is bread for people who need life. It is food for the weary. It is grace for the powerless. Today another table has been prepared. Prepared by the God who has never stopped feeding God's children. The God who is more loving than the best father. More tender than the gentlest mother. More faithful than the wisest grandmother who could never bear the thought of someone's child leaving hungry.

Thanks be to God that somewhere along the way the Son of Man came to eat and drink with sinners like you and me. Jesus said, "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." So come. Come with whatever burdens you have been carrying. Come weary. Come hungry. Come exactly as you are. And let Christ feed you. AMEN.