



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 9 (A)

Powerless

[RCL] **Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

There once was a babysitter who watched a little boy who was quite easy, because he was always so good. He had a younger sister that he was protective of and got along with well... or so the babysitter thought. One day, the sister was playing with some of her toys when the brother came over and just hauled off and smacked her upside the head. He wasn't provoked by anything, and his sister was startled and hurt, so of course, she screamed. When asked why he did this, his answer was, "I like to be good, but I just wanted to see what she would do if I hit her. So, I guess the devil made me do it." The babysitter was caught between addressing the naughty behavior and trying not to laugh while doing so.

"The devil made me do it." What a phrase! Or perhaps some of us have heard ourselves say a different phrase with a similar meaning, when surprised by a certain action or reaction, "Something came over me." When things like this happen, we are puzzled, but we shouldn't be. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung explains that if our unconscious motivations remain unconscious, then there will be times when those motivations that live in what is termed a "complex" can do that very thing—just come over us. "The devil made me do it" is certainly pithier than saying, "My unconscious complex was triggered and needs my attention so I behaved this way."

However, God has given us a great gift in these matters, if we pay attention. If we ask ourselves, "What is God trying to tell me in bringing up this complex?" then we have the opportunity to know ourselves better and to also know God more. This is what Paul is talking about in our epistle today. He says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Paul is basically saying, "The devil made me do it."

We are not alone in our struggle to free ourselves from sin. Sin, as The Episcopal Church's "Outline of the Faith, commonly called the Catechism" defines it, is "the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation" (BCP, 848). We all have different sins that we grapple with. Some stem from our family systems (the idea of sins of the fathers being visited on future generations is a very real thing in family systems therapy), some from our work (day-to-day struggles and/or overarching ethical concerns), and some from just being human (often

to do with not getting our way).

We also have the capacity to have the humility to admit that we can't break cycles of sin alone and without help. For example, in Alcoholics Anonymous, the first three steps one must take are to admit that you are powerless over your addiction, to believe that a Power greater than yourself can restore you to sanity, and then to surrender your will and life over to the care of God, as you understand and view God. Sounds like an altar call, doesn't it?

We are powerless over the sin that we have, but as Christians, we believe that God can make us whole. According to our catechism, "Sin has power over us because we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted" (BCP, 849). However, God rarely brings liberty and wholeness until we're willing to give ourselves over to God. It takes humility to do this. When we come into church and try to give off the "illusion of perfection," it doesn't do us or any others any good, nor does it do any good for our relationships with God.

People who attend 12-Step meetings understand this deeply. The people at these meetings admit that they are struggling sinners, they know it, and they put it out there for everyone else to know. The community and humility that results from AA meetings can be more authentic than many of our church services. They know what we should know, too—that we can do nothing without God. As Paul found out, when he could do nothing else, God did everything. In the end, all that was left was for Paul to give thanks.

This season after Pentecost is all about navigating the way of discipleship. We are called to be disciples and Jesus continues to teach us about discipleship's difficult road. We often believe that we are responsible for our salvation—if I go to church every Sunday, if I'm nice to this horrid person that I don't like, if I do more in the community, then maybe I will have enough credit to make it to heaven. When we think this way, we get caught in the very sin that we are trying to avoid and we leave no room for God's grace to flow. It becomes all about us and not about God. It's what the Rev. David Lose calls "Goldilocks syndrome: never being satisfied." Regarding today's Gospel reading, Rev. Lose says "John (and the God John represents) is just toooooo severe, while Jesus (and the God he represents) is just toooooo accepting. We'd like our religious leader to be juuuust right, which pretty much means juuuust like us."

When we think we know what we're doing according to the world's view, God teaches us a new step in our dance. We are supposed to be different. We are supposed to be followers of Jesus Christ. After all, if we made God in our image like in Norse or Greek mythology, who would save us? Who would draw us out to be the people God created us to be? Jesus says in our Gospel today, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Boy, is that out of our comfort zone! The more we follow God's ways, the more we know that we will be rejected by the acknowledged experts of the world—those that might see what we do as followers of Jesus as foolish.

We are called to a different standard. When we stop listening to those voices from without, we can finally hear the voice that comes from within. When we try to carry out our own salvation, we get weary, we feel burdened. That is when Jesus says to us, “Come to me... and I will give you rest.” This rest can come to us like a mindfulness exercise: pausing to be still and noticing five things with each of our senses—things that will ground us in the present moment with God. In doing so, we rest in God and who God created us to be instead of being taken over by the “devil” or our complexes. When we rest, we also give other people permission to rest and experience God fully. How would our world change if we focused on simply being with God and cultivating thanksgiving? Let’s find out. Amen.

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