

Romans 7: 14-25

August 8, 2021

THE GROUCH HOUSE, FINDING WISDOM IN A NURSING HOME, AND TOUCHING A BUTTERFLY

I enjoy the Calvin & Hobbes cartoons. They seem to speak to me. In one cartoon Calvin is sitting in his little chair in the corner. His dad is standing behind him with an angry flushed face. He says to Calvin: "Now, will you be a good boy?" Calvin turns and looks at his father and says, "Yes and No." As usual, Calvin has a good understanding of who he is. He knew there were times he would be a good boy (usually around Christmas) and times when he would be a bad boy.

That is the way it is with all of us. That is the story of my life and of your life. There is both good and bad in all of us. There are times in our lives when the good shows through, and there are also times when the bad shows through. The poet James Truslow Adams expressed it this way:

There's so much good in the worst of us,  
And so much bad in the best of us,  
That it ill behooves any of us,  
To find fault with the rest of us.

This is what St. Paul was saying in the Scripture lesson we read for this morning. We always think of Paul as the great hero of the Christian faith. We even call him a saint. But Paul had some real struggles as he lived his life. Paul says, "I cannot understand myself. I love God and I want to do what is right. At times the good that I want to do, I do not do, and the evil that I do not want to do, that is what I find myself doing." Paul is saying, "There is both good and bad in me."

That is the story of my life and perhaps it is the story of your life as well. Sometimes I think, "I don't understand why God did not make two of me. There is material a plenty in my life for both a rogue and a saint." Nelson Mandela wrote, "Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying to do what is right." There are times in our lives when love comes pouring forth. There are other times when a vicious kind of hate comes boiling up. There are times in our lives when we are very stingy and selfish. There are other times when we are very generous and giving. There are times when we are doubtful and negative and pessimistic, and there are times when we are faithful and optimistic and full of hope. We all have times when we struggle.

I read about a man in New England who was basically a pretty good fellow; but there were times when he became a terrible old grouch. Behind his house he had a small one room shed. He called that his "grouch house". Whenever he got into one of those grouchy moods, he would go to the grouch house and stay there until he got over it. There have been times in our marriage when Winona would suggest that I go work in the garage for a while. Although not so named, that was my grouch house. There are times in all of our lives when we are happy, and there are times when we are grouchy.

One time a man and his wife were at a church meeting. They made an appeal for funds for an organization to help youth who were in trouble. The man immediately wrote out a check for \$500, and gave it to the organization. His wife said, "Why didn't you wait until we got home and had a chance to talk about how much we were going to give?" He said, "I wanted to give it right now before my heart hardened." How many times in our lives have we had good intentions, but then our heart hardened? There is a generous spirit and there is a stingy spirit in all of our lives.

I read a story about a German professor who every morning would humbly bow before his students. He explained: "As I look at my students, I see in each one of them the seeds of greatness. I know that some of those students are going to cultivate those seeds and become truly great persons. I bow in honor of their future greatness." As I look out at each of you this morning, I see in each one of you seeds of great living. I bow before you and challenge you to draw out the very best that is within you" The great for each of us is to cultivate and water those seeds until they grow and mature and become a big part of our life.

I have good news this morning. Paul said, "Who can help us? Who can help us draw out the good that is within? Thanks be to God who has given us Jesus Christ." Paul tells us that Jesus came to guide us and to draw out the good that is within us. As we study the New Testament, we see people coming in contact with Jesus and the good within them is magnified. One day Jesus was asking his disciples what people thought about him and they said to him, "Some say you are a prophet, others say you are John the Baptist, and still others say you are Elijah." Jesus then asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon said to him, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to Simon, "I am giving you a new name. You shall be Peter, the rock man, and upon this rock I will build my church." Peter the rock man? At times Peter was everything but a rock. He was constantly wavering in his faith. One time he was ready to die for Christ, and a few days later, he denied that he even knew Him. But when Christ looked at Peter, he saw the seeds of greatness, the potential. By naming him "the rock" he sought to bring out the best in Peter. After years of being touched by the spirit of Christ, Peter became the rock man upon whom Christ's church was built.

Jesus does the same thing for you and me. As we study His life and His teachings and let ourselves be touched by his spirit, we begin to draw out the very best that is within us. This requires us to believe in ourselves; to have a good personal self-image. Someone once asked, "Are people basically good with intermittent flashes of evil, or are people basically evil with intermittent flashes of goodness?" I believe people are inherently good. Remember the two great commandments of Jesus. He tells us that the greatest commandment is to love our God with all our heart, mind and soul. He went on to say the second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." To love ourselves we must have a good personal self-image. This second commandment tells me I must love myself in order to love my neighbor. I must be the person God created me to be.

To have a good personal image we must focus on the positive things in our lives and not focus on the mistakes we have made. Last week pastor Steve began a series of looking at rock music and religion. He looks at the music of his generation – the music of the 1980's. I have to go back a few years earlier – the music of my time was from about 1957 through the 60's. In 1962 the British duo of Chad and Jeremy released a song about moving forward out of the heartache of breaking up with a girlfriend. It talked about the guilt of mistakes made in the relationship but then came the big line of the song: "But that was yesterday, and yesterday's gone". That is a great line for all of us to remember. We can't change yesterday; we can learn from yesterday but we have to leave it behind and move forward. Years ago, on a trip to San Francisco, I saw a T-shirt that said, "Your boat sank. Get over it!" Another song also comes to mind. The Eagles was one of my favorite bands and the Hotel California album is a true classic. In the song "Already Gone" we find these words: "So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains, and we never even know we have the key."

We hold the key, We have the power to direct our lives by the choices we make. For example, when we wake each morning, we can choose what kind of day we want to have. We can choose to be in a good mood or to be in a bad mood. How we live our lives is dependent on the choices we make. Abe Lincoln said, "Most people are as happy as they've decided to be." A recent study found happiness increases 10 percent on Fridays. Why is that? People are excited about the coming weekend, so they decide to be happy. They make up their minds to be happy. They make up their minds on Fridays to enjoy their lives more.

Our challenge is to let every day be a Friday. We need to give ourselves permission to be happy every day. The Scripture does not say "Friday is the day the Lord has made." In the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm we are told, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us be happy and rejoice in it." We are called to be happy and rejoice; to let go of the past, to forgive ourselves of the mistakes we have made and to move forward.

A man was hit by a car and the paramedic asked him: "How are you doing?" The man replied, "I make a living." He focused on the positive.

I read a story about a 92 year old man named John. His sight was very bad and his wife had recently passed away. He was taken by cab to a seniors' home where he was met by Miranda, a young aid. As he made his way down the hall Miranda described his room saying the sunlight comes in through a big window and the furniture is new and comfortable. Right in the middle of the description John interrupted her and said, "I love it. I love it. I love it!" Miranda laughed and said, "Sir, we're not there yet. You haven't seen it." John said, "No, you don't have to show it to me. Whether I like my room or not does not depend on how the furniture is arranged. It depends on how my mind is arranged. Happiness is something you decide ahead of time."

James Boswell was a famous Scottish lawyer and writer. For a period of time, he tried to pattern his life after other great people. Finally, Boswell came to realize that some great things were already within him and what he needed to do was forget about the greatness of others and draw

out the best that was within him. Boswell put it this way: “I saw my error in suffering so much from the contemplation of others. I can never be them, therefore let me not vainly attempt it in my imagination. I must be Mr. Boswell and no other. Let me make him as perfect as possible.” Yes, that is the challenge. I believe God calls us to run our own race, not to run the race of others.

So, our first requirement in the great commandment is to love ourselves. Once we learn to live the life God wants us to live, then we can turn to the difficult part of the Commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself”. I don’t know about you but there are a lot of people that I just can’t love. There are some people that I just can’t tolerate, and yet I am called to love them.

I think the kind of love Jesus is talking about is living with a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice toward others. Jesus is not talking about romantic love; not the love of one individual for another; not loving something that is lovely to you. Jesus is talking about a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hands and voices against us. It is the ability to see through the layers of ugliness we perceive in others.

In John Lewis’s book, Walking With the Wind, he describes one method he used when faced with a hateful, angry, aggressive, even despicable person. He said he visualizes that person as an infant; as a baby. He writes: “If you can see this full-grown attacker who faces you as the pure, innocent child that he or she once was – that we all once were – it is not hard to find compassion in your heart. It is not hard to find forgiveness.” This is the sense of love, this is the sense of peace, that Jesus calls us to give to our neighbor. This capacity for compassion is something we must carry inside ourselves every waking minute of the day. It shapes our response to a curt cashier in the grocery store, or to a driver cutting us off in traffic, or a response to an editorial in the newspaper that rips you to your soul.

God has called the people of this congregation, and like-minded people throughout the world who believe in love, faith and hope, to spread the commandment of Jesus to love our neighbor as ourself. We know in this struggle we will sometimes fail, we will sometimes make horrible mistakes, we will sometimes disappoint ourselves, we will sometimes do bad or sinful things, but we must know that throughout all of our actions, when our hearts are in the right place, when we strive to do what is right, when we carry love and forgiveness in our hearts, that we are doing our part to live the life God calls us to live.

The theologian, Dr. Gerald L. Stephens, tells a story of a Japanese magazine where on one page there was a picture of a butterfly that was a dull gray. Dr. Stephens followed the instructions and held his hand over the butterfly. He said, “A wonderful thing happened. The dull gray butterfly was transformed into a flashing rainbow of colors. The touch and warmth of my hand brought out the real beauty of the butterfly.

There is a beautiful butterfly within each of us. There is a beautiful person inside each of us. There is a Spirit that can touch you and me and bring out all the beauty and the goodness of our life. This is the Spirit of Jesus. Let Him touch us again and again and again. With his touch we will become the beautiful person that God meant for us to be.