



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## The Challenge of Choosing What Is Right

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

July 6, 2008

*Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*

Romans 7:15-25a

Woody Allen's films are almost always probing, questioning films which study human nature in unique and revealing ways. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is such a film. In it, he struggles with the choices that humans have to make throughout their lives. The character that he plays is a struggling film-maker trapped in a miserable marriage. As he thinks about a decision that he is trying to make, he remarks to his niece: "My heart says one thing; my head says something else. Very hard to get your heart and head together in life. In my case, they're not even friendly." His words echo those written by the apostle Paul centuries before when he agonized over his sin.

**We hear the text and are shocked: Paul struggled with sin.** Paul, the Christian, the great apostle, the one who brought the faith to the Gentiles, the one who wrote much of the New Testament, struggled with sin. "I don't understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate."

We hear these words from Paul and we know that he struggled with sin. Paul makes no bones about it. Although he wants to do what is right, he ends up doing what is wrong. Paul grappled with, he struggled with, sin.

There are, of course, those who will argue that Paul must have been speaking about his life before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Others will argue just as loudly that Paul was talking about his current situation, since his words describe a present situation and the anguish seems too close to the surface for it not to be Paul's predicament now.

Whichever way we view it, as a past or present struggle for Paul, one thing is clear: he's writing about something he knows all too well—his own disheartening, painful struggle with sin. He feels helpless. He feels trapped. He does not do what he wants to do, but instead, he does the very things that he hates. It's as if he has no control over his own actions.

This is what makes it so painful for Paul. He wants to do what is right—he really does—but for some reason, for some unknown, unexplainable, crazy reason, he just can't do it. Paul struggled with sin.

**Be honest: We struggle with sin too.** Paul's struggle is our own. Oh, we may not have to worry about the headline sins. For most of us, it's the little, everyday things that get in our way. But when we hear these words of Paul, we understand. We know what Paul is talking about because we've been there.

I remember a conversation I once had with a woman who said, "I hate it when I do something that I don't mean to do. It's as if I have no control. When ever that happens, I always ask myself the big question: 'Why did I do that?'"

That's what it's all about, isn't it? Why do we do the very things we hate? When we face the reality of sin in our own lives the question forms within us: Why do I do these

things?

Why do we find it so hard to forgive someone?

Why do we find it so easy to believe the worst about someone else, questioning everything from their faithfulness to what lies behind their motives.

Why do we...? You fill in the blank. Boil any situation of sin down, and we find ourselves asking the question: why did I do this very thing I hate?

A character in a novel by William Faulkner tried to answer this question. He remarked about sin: *Sin—you ain't got to; you can't help it.* It's a silly, contradictory statement, isn't it? *Sin—you ain't got to; you can't help it.* Though the statement may be silly, its truth is nevertheless real. That's the way it is in our world. No matter how hard we try to avoid it, sin finds a way of creeping into our lives.

Paul sees sin as something that dwells within us, something that goes against the way of God. Others see sin as a result of some powerful force of evil operating in opposition to God. Whatever, sin is a part of the existence we know.

Most of the time we really do want to do what is right—we really do. But for some reason, for some unknown, unexplainable, crazy reason, we just can't do it. If we're honest with ourselves we'll face the facts: we struggle with sin.

**We struggle because evil lies close at hand.** At least that's what Paul decided. He writes, "When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand." That's why we struggle.

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin wrote about the qualities of the perfect human. One of the qualities which Franklin decided the perfect human must have is complete humility.

When he began to ponder his own attempts to achieve perfection, he wrote that he would have the most trouble with humility. His comment is classic: "If I could ever really believe that I had completely overcome my pride, I would probably be proud of it."

Evil lies close at hand, and so we struggle. Sin has a way of forcing its way into our best thoughts and our best intentions and perverting them beyond all recognition in spite of all our actions to prevent it.

Harold Nebelsick, my theology professor in seminary used to warn us about this very thing. He told us our bad or evil thoughts that we should worry about, because he knew that most people could recognize those for what they were. It was, he believed, our thoughts that we were so convinced were right that were the greatest threat to us—and others. It was another way of saying that when we want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

Several years ago now I was part of a mission trip to build houses in Mexico. The group we were part of carried with us a large number of gifts from various church groups. It was all so well-intentioned. But, as the packages were being distributed to the poorest families you could ever meet, it seemed downright decadent. It was offensive in so many ways. What we had done with the best intentions left me feeling absolutely sick.

That's what we're up against. This huge force of evil that cannot be explained or accounted for. This all-pervasive element that corrupts the good that we want to do. It's no small wonder that Paul arrived at the conclusion that he was trapped by the power of sin. For whenever he wanted to do right, evil was close at hand.

And so we struggle. We struggle with sin because evil is waiting to sneak into our thoughts and motives against all our desires. And that's what happens, isn't it? Evil corrupts the good that we desire to do. All of our actions, even our best ones, even our faith, can turn into a "what's-in-it-for-me" reality. How hard it is when evil is close at hand.

**Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!** Suddenly, into the midst of his discussion on the human situation, Paul bursts into song: Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Hold on a minute, Paul, we scream. How on earth did you get there? Not two sentences ago you were beating your breast and lamenting, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Come on, Paul. You had us right with you. We knew what you were talking about. We felt trapped too.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! There it is again. Right in the midst of our struggle, right in the middle of our realization that we are helpless in the face of evil, comes an unexpected doxology. Perhaps Paul is on to something here. Perhaps, just perhaps, there is hope.

God knows. God knows what we are experiencing. God knows us better than we know ourselves. And yet God has thought enough of us to make us partners in God's redeeming and reconciling work. By God's grace, Paul was able to be made new and to minister to God's people with words of encouragement and hope. Paul, the one who admits without fear that he struggles with sin, carries the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul, the one who calls himself the chief of all sinners, preaches to others about the joy of being made new.

And so God calls us. By God's grace we are called to be the people of God. Not because of our own perfection or because we are better than others, but simply because of the unsearchable grace of God.

This is what Paul knows. This is what allows him to sing, even while realizing his own sinfulness. Even more, God's grace is what empowers Paul to teach others to sing as forgiven sinners. For the joyful good news is that in Christ Jesus, God has made us new. That's what Romans is all about. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And so we press on. Those of us who have experienced the grace of God in our own lives and know what being made new is all about are called. Even in this world where evil is always close at hand and the good we wish to do is often left undone, we are called. When we gather at this Table to feast on God's grace, we are then called to share that grace in the world.

With the call of God comes responsibility. But isn't it a joyful responsibility, this chance we have to teach others to sing an unending song of freedom? "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"