

## “We Are Accepted”

Sermon of the Rev. Dan Hatch  
Communion Sunday, July 6, 2008  
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
Nu’uanu Community Church, Honolulu

Scripture: Romans 7:14-25a

Text: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* (Romans 7:15)

Paul has a problem. In our text for today he states it quite simply and concisely: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* However, Paul then goes on for another 10 verse to explain why he thinks he has this problem. It is at this point that **we** have a problem, as our eyes glaze over, and our minds go numb as we struggle to understand what Paul is trying to say. For that reason this is a passage that most pastors, including myself, try to avoid. I have succeeded in doing so for the past 22 years of my ordination. Yet this week the passage would not let me go, so you get the B & B of my struggle, the benefit or boredom! Let’s hope it will be the former.

Paul’s problem is one we can all relate to. As a broad category, think about New Year’s resolutions. How many of you can honestly say that you have always succeeded in keeping your New Year’s resolutions? (Show of hands) Most New Year’s resolutions are things we know we should do, and know that they would be good for us to do, yet we do not keep them! Why? That is the problem that Paul is wrestling with.

Let me give you an example. Almost a year ago at the Church of the Crossroads’ annual bazaar, I bid on ten piano lessons offered by Shizuko Mukaida, a remarkably energetic 92 year-old who stands during my half hour lessons, for when she stands, she almost reaches my height when I am sitting on her piano bench! I have always wanted to play the piano well enough to play hymns. I knew the importance of practicing and knew that unless I had easy access to a piano, I would not practice. When I was called by Nu’uanu to serve as your half-time Interim Senior Minister I realized that I would have the income to buy a piano. Therefore, I invested in a good electronic piano that could withstand Upper Manoa Valley’s humidity. The piano also came equipped with earphones so that I could practice any time of the day or night without disturbing Sue! With everything in place, I felt I should be able to carve out at minimum of 15 minutes a day to practice, because I know practice is important in learning any skill. Thus prepared, I started my piano lessons.

Long story made short, Shizuko is an excellent piano teacher, and half-way through my ten lessons, I am a failure in my ability to discipline myself to do the amount of practicing that I know I must do to take full advantage of the excellent instruction I am getting from Shizuko! I suspect this is why Paul’s passage would not let me go. Like Paul, *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* I am in good company. It is a universal problem, often characterized in cartoons with a little devil and a little angel on each shoulder, each whispering in our ear, each trying to convince us what we should do!

Paul states the dilemma this way in verse 21; *So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.* Put another way when I want to listen to the angel whispering in my right ear, I find myself listening to the devil whispering in my left ear! Why? This is Paul's question. First Paul expresses his gratitude for the law that reminds him what he should do. But the law is not enough to make him do what he should do. Paul finds himself in company with Jesus disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane who Jesus warned in Matthew 26:41 to "*stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of temptation for the mind is willing and the flesh is weak.*" Paul thought there was inherent evil, or sin in the body, that has a will of its own. That was his explanation. I don't think it is that simple. Jesus was talking about staying spiritually awake, rather than physically awake, for it is in the spiritual realm that we will find our solution.

The context for this universal dilemma with which Paul is wrestling is a spiritual one. From a spiritual perspective there are three factors at work: the nature of spirituality, the ego, and time. As such, the first question has to be, "Who's in control?" Clearly it is not us! Paul states it as a battle between good and evil, a dichotomy between spirit and flesh. I think that is an overly simplistic a solution, as it is not really an either/or, black or white problem. So who is in control of your life? Should it not be God—the God who gives you life, causes your heart to beat, and breathes you? However, the God who gives us life also gives us freedom of choice as to how we choose to live that life. When we are born, helpless and totally dependent on others for our survival, God is programming us to experience unconditional love from others. We like being the center of attention, having others meet our every need. This is how we develop our egos.

The problem is that we see those meeting our needs as doing so because of our needs, rather than as agents of God's love. As we mature in our sense of self, we begin to realize that there is a Universal Mystery, a Love we call God, who is the Universal Connector, the Great Creator responsible for the right relationships within all aspects of creation. Our challenge then is to let go of that part of our egos that see others and creation being there to serve **our** needs, yet hold onto that part of our egos that recognize that we are an important and unconditionally loved facet of the entire creation, albeit and infinitesimal one. Most of the time when we make resolutions, we do it to meet **our** perceived needs, our ego needs. These may not be God's needs for us. Thus piano playing is my attempt to meet my perceived need at this time, but it may be peripheral to God's needs for me at this juncture, and therefore my failure to practice as I should.

This is where the time factor comes in. We cannot predict or see the future, yet that is where **our** will and resolutions usually take us. No wonder we get frustrated! But this is not to say we should not prepare for a future. How many of us have not ended up where we thought we would when we were in college? God gives us free will, so that we can chose to be obedient and live lives obedient to God's will. In doing so God knows that for us life will be a series of trials and errors. Does this mean I shouldn't have taken piano lessons? Not necessarily, for what I am learning in the process may be a necessary part of my preparation for some thing much bigger in my future. Perhaps my timing is just off. I need to trust that if I am doing God's will, things will unfold as they should. What is most important is to realize that God loves us unconditionally, warts, dead-ends and all, in the process of becoming the persons that God would have us become. No matter what we do we are appreciated, accepted and unconditionally loved by God as a child of God despite all our trials and tribulations, false starts, and ego tangents.

That is why this Table is so important. It is a reminder of God's unconditional love, the grace of God's forgiveness, and that God constantly seeks for us to align our will with God's will. At this Table, the Table of God's son, Christ Jesus, we are accepted at the Table, in the present moment, just as we are, no matter what we have done or not done, and fed with the Bread of Life, and the Cup of Blessing to strengthen us to continue on life's challenging spiritual journey to become ever increasingly more obedient to God's will.

Like Paul, you and I know that when we want to do good, evil lies close at hand. Our egos do not like change. It is our resistance to change that is the sin that separates us from God's love, and takes us off on our ego tangents. We do not have sinful bodies. As Cassie says in The Color Purple, "God don't make no junk." What we do have is an ego which is a critical part of our spiritual development as it is only through our egos that we can come to know, beyond any doubt, that we are an unconditionally loved child of God. Our spiritual challenge is to transform our egos from a self-centered human ego, to a spiritual divine one. This is only possible if we can ultimately surrender to the idea that we are not in control of the lives God has given us, and seek to become obedient to God's will.

When we surrender our will to God's will, we end up knowing that we are accepted just as we are in the process of becoming the person God would have us become, and find ourselves in the same place of gratitude that Paul did in Romans 7: 25: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

May you find God's on-going, guilt-free blessing as your life continues to unfold and blossom as a child of God.