



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

We Cannot Save Ourselves

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 9, 2023

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹

Sugar, for me, is a constant temptation. Each day, I tell myself that I'll be good, that I can, in fact, control myself, that, for once, I won't slip and indulge. At first, things seem fine when I successfully resist that vanilla bean scone at breakfast. But, by the time I get to lunch, I really want a cookie with my salad. It's small, after all, and I'm otherwise behaving. In the midafternoon, I reach for an ice-cold Frappuccino to serve as much-needed pick-me-up. Of course, a chocolate or two from a colleague's candy bowl won't do much harm. And at the end of a long, hard day, it makes sense that I reward myself with some cake or ice cream. When all is said and done, I've had four or five servings of candy or pastries or dessert. The struggle is real.

For you, sugar may not be as much of a challenge. Perhaps you are tempted by alcohol or diet soda or cigarettes. Maybe you find it difficult to curtail your spending, to refrain from criticizing others, or to get to bed before midnight. But I'm guessing that, in one area or another, you also feel out-of-control when it comes to your own actions. I suspect that, at some point, you too may think you want to do one thing and end up doing something else.

Centuries before Sigmund Freud revolutionized our understanding of human behavior with his groundbreaking study of the unconscious and centuries before twelve step programs helped addicts everywhere recognize their powerlessness over substances, the apostle Paul vividly depicted the war that takes place within the human individual. He lamented that he did not do what he wanted. He admitted that he actually did what he did not want to do. "I can will what is right," he said, "but I cannot do it...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Paul painted a picture of a terribly confused, deeply conflicted, wholly compromised person—a picture that, in all likelihood, reflects many of us.

Like Paul, we easily become trapped in conflicts between our stated desires and our ultimate actions, between our conduct and our intentions. We like to believe we have clarity about the things that matter but our behavior reveals a far murkier reality. We say that we want to get work done and then spend hours on YouTube or TikTok. We say that we want to treat others with respect and then shove past them

¹ The Book of Common Prayer (1979), 218.

on the subway platform. We say that we want to prize honesty above all else and then catch ourselves in scores of small lies.

Such conflicts appear on the communal level as well as the individual one. For example, few of us would admit that we think discrimination of any kind is acceptable, and yet our society continues to produce outcomes that are objectively discriminatory. We claim that the prospect of climate change appalls us as we collectively consume fossil fuels at record rates. We declare that no one should go to bed hungry, but most of us sleep peacefully while a few of us starve.

Sin, we discover, is a crafty force, working deceitfully and overtime to frustrate our virtuous intentions. It distracts us from following through on our promises. It assures us that we don't need to be so rigid. It makes excuses. It rationalizes. It justifies itself. It muddles the ethical dimensions of the situations we face. It tricks us into thinking that what is good is actually evil and what is evil is actually good. Before we know it, we find ourselves in a total moral morass.

Trying harder to defeat sin may ameliorate our predicaments temporarily. We can resist sin, at least for a time, by sheer force of will—by relentlessly interrogating ourselves, by following the regimented steps of established programs, by attending the right meetings and seeing the right therapists. We can stay away from our triggers. We can exercise more. We can put ourselves on a stricter diet. We can delete social media. We can sign up for all sorts of tracking and monitoring apps on our phone. We can make amends and advocate for change and volunteer for every possible initiative that aims to help others and make the world a better place.

Yet, at some point, sooner or later, the demon of sin will again rear its ugly head. It may not show up in the same way it did last time, but it will emerge. We cannot resist it forever. Human beings are imperfect creatures. Our inner moral conflicts—between the evil and the good—are inevitable. However strong and hard-working we are, however well-informed and well-meaning we may be, our actions will never entirely match up with the commitments we make to ourselves and our communities.

Eventually, whether we like it or not, our ability to withstand temptation on our own will reach its limit, and it is then that we will discover that we cannot save ourselves. Priest and psychiatrist Christopher Cook, in his theology of addiction, puts it this way: “The inner conflict of addiction can be understood as concerned with a division of the self between openness to the grace and power of God in Christ, on the one hand, and openness to the power of sin, on the other hand. The former offers the possibility of freedom, whereas the latter offers only further entrapment in the addictive process. Self-reliance does not offer a solution, for it is the powerlessness of the self in the face of the power of sin that is at the root of the problem.”²

After nearly ten verses of heightened handwringing, Paul is exasperated and exhausted. “Wretched man that I am!” he exclaims. “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Paul knows that he can't rescue himself—and it's not for lack of trying. He has displayed remarkable insight into his own condition and tremendous eagerness to get it right. Yet he is still ultimately wretched; he is still in need of saving by someone else.

Jesus reaches out to Paul and to all of us, his wretched ones, not because we are wise and intelligent, not because we are moral or good, not even because we have faith in him, but merely because we are tired, burdened, and in need. Like Paul, we are exasperated and exhausted, having tried and failed, time and again, to save ourselves, to get it right. Like Paul, we are overloaded with the sin that for some reason we have been unable to escape. Jesus wants to save us. He yearns to give us healing and relief. He is not

² Christopher C. H. Cook, *Alcohol, Addiction, and Christian Ethics*, 146.

interested in improvement or perfection, in atonement, accountability, or amends. He simply beckons us to come, lay down our burden, and rest.

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