

## July 9

One of St. Paul's most famous passages, our reading for Sunday, July 5, is Romans 7: 13-25, esp., "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do...who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!".

I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. Let's try to say this in another way. I can choose, decide, discern, settle upon, determine, what is right. That is, when I have made a judgment or decided on a course of behavior, I am capable of making a commitment to action; I can detect, recognize, see, what is right to do in a situation; but I am helpless to carry through that decision in what I do, (if I do behave as I have determined I should—hurrah! But I cannot be certain that I will). There is an impediment, a blockage, a disempowerment that renders me (and all of us) helpless to accomplish our purpose and intention with certainty.

All of this stands quite apart from the psychological/spiritual issues of mixed motivations and various other emotional limitations or our predispositions toward people or situations based on past experience or upbringing.

What St. Paul seems to convey here is that—all the personal stuff aside—the obstacle(s) is/are real and objective. The impediment is not simply a feeling or choice on our part to make the necessary effort (obviously that can be part of the problem, but it isn't the whole thing). So, we can conclude, yelling at ourselves, yanking at our bootstraps, trying to bribe or induce ourselves to a course of action is not be enough. All that is a necessary part of a complete response, but is not sufficient.

What are we struggling with here? Is it flawed motivation? Mixed feelings? Fear, shame, self-doubt? Concerns about risk, danger, resulting trouble or uproar? No. What St. Paul appears to be saying is that the obstacles we face in doing the right thing are real and objective. We are not struggling merely with feelings or a half-hearted effort to do what we know we ought to do, (though feelings and poor effort can be part of the problem). We truly are in the midst of a struggle with something more than our willpower. Like the glutinous mud our feet or wheels can get stuck in, the concerted effort we can command ourselves to make and our knowing the tricks of careful lifting or pushing which will help stuck wheels and

feet get free are not enough to actually get us free on our own. We need to make our efforts AND be helped from outside the bog. That outside, objective, independent help is what Paul is referring to as the source of rescue.

This help is what Jesus Christ gives. As the 18th century hymn in our hymnal puts it:

“He to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood”. (“Come thou fount of every blessing”, Hymn 686)

St. Paul has many more things to say about the person and the work of Jesus Christ, and the greater story and purpose there is in his coming, and we shall touch on some of those matters. But for now, I want to be clear about what I understand St. Paul means in this little snippet from Romans.

In brief, St. Paul says that while we do see what we should do and how to do it, we can't (not simply don't or won't—it is not entirely volitional) carry through. We are prevented in many ways—not least by our own disposition. But the story of God at work in the world includes the person and work of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. By and through his incarnation ministry, passion, resurrection, and ascension Jesus has accomplished the Victory of God over every power and circumstance, and that work was done for the human family and for the healing of creation.

There have been many battles and struggles over two thousand years, and these have been the struggles to subdue fully the enemy whom Jesus has already conquered (think of the Normandy invasion—the successful allied landings were the decisive beginning of the end, though many hard, bloody, terrible times lay ahead were required for complete triumph). In God's good time the final accomplishment of the renewed world will be accomplished. So, as it was for the time between Normandy beachheads in 1944 and meeting our allies from the East at the Elbe river in 1945, so it is now for us. Jesus Christ is our literal liberator, and we can face our struggles and challenges befriended and with the power and presence of Jesus Christ. Thus we may say, “I can do all things through him that strengthens me”.

Now, to be relevant to our national moment, we can take two brief texts as our guidance for facing the pandemic and the growing grassroots movement to face our national besetting sin of racism and white privilege. Both come from Philippians: 2:3, and 4:13.

Phil 4:13- "I can do all things through him that strengthens me"; Phil 2:3 "...Count others more significant than yourselves".

We can face our national history and deal with our social distortions, and we find the strength and courage in our faith in him who loved us when we were yet sinners.

We can seek the common good and be forbearing and compliant and flexible as we move forward together through these trying times, seeking the best for all, not the easy way for ourselves.