

“Capacity”
Romans 7:14-25a
17th Sunday after Pentecost

September 15, 2024
Westminster, Greenville
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Our topic this morning is sin.
Paul’s theology of sin.

To tell you the truth, I almost didn’t preach on this topic.
Why was I tempted to shy away?

For starters, I was afraid.
Anxious.

A bit worried that you might consider another sermon on sin...
to be a boring topic,
or a depressing topic,
or maybe just a repetitive topic.

How many of you have ever heard a sermon on sin before?

I couldn’t remember the last time I preached about sin, so I looked
it up.

March 19, 2023.
What is that, 18 months ago?

My guess is that none of you woke up this morning and thought,
“Oh, can you believe it’s been 18 LONG months since Ben has preached
about sin? I sure hope he brings the wrath of God from the pulpit of
Westminster this morning!”

Speaking of God’s wrath, do you remember this sermon?

“O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in:

‘tis a great furnace of wrath,
 a wide and bottomless pit...that you are held over
 in the hand of God...

“...you hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it...and you have...nothing to lay hold of to save yourself...nothing of your own, nothing that you have ever done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.”¹

In case you were wondering, I did NOT write that sermon.
 Do you know who did?
 Jonathan Edwards. In July of 1741.
 And you remember the title, right?

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

That used to be standard fare in church.
 But times change.

Back in 1937, H. Richard Niebuhr—the brother of the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—wrote a critique of the 20th century mainline church, and its theology, a critique that went like this:

“A God without wrath
 brought men without sin
 into a Kingdom without judgment
 through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

In other words, H. Richard Niebuhr argued that talking about SIN, preaching about sin, having some idea of the gravity of our sin...it was all just fading away...

¹ As quoted by David L. Bartlett, in his essay, “Showing Mercy,” found in *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?*, edited by Mike Graves, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004.

Now that was 87 years ago.
So what about today?

What IS our capacity...
for talking about sin,
hearing sermons on sin,
or just imagining what it means—to be a sinner—these days?

We'll get to that question in a moment.

Paul, of course, was at no shortage of words when it came to the topic of sin.

In chapter 3 of his letter to the Romans, he writes:
“...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift...”

Which leads him to his question in chapter 6:
“Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

And yet, when we get to chapter 7, we discover that what Paul said in chapter 6 is not so easy.

As he puts it in today's text:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Have any of you ever had that experience?

Despite your best intentions, you do not do what you want, but you did the very thing you hate...maybe that's the REAL reason I did not want to preach this sermon today.

Not because of you.

Worried that you'll be bored with another sermon on sin.

No, no...maybe the reason I almost didn't preach this sermon was because of me.

You see, as soon as I hear Paul's words to us today, my mind goes to work. My memory jumps into action. And scenes from my life start coming to mind.

For example—May, 1997.

My last month in seminary.

One more final exam to take.

It was a class that I had not enjoyed very much, and I blamed the professor.

We got the class evaluation forms, and I was sure it was the teacher's fault that I disliked this class, so I let her know just how I felt on the evaluation.

It was SCATHING.

I ripped the syllabus apart, I ripped her lectures apart.

I told her just how much her teaching needed to improve.

Of course, it never crossed my mind at the time that there may have been other reasons—none of them to do with her—why I was disengaged from that class.

It couldn't have been senioritis...oh, no.

It couldn't have been my own nervousness about not having a job at graduation, not knowing what my future would hold...oh, no.

Oh no, couldn't have been any of that.

I got my first inkling that maybe I shouldn't have said what I said when the pastor who was my confirmation pastor—back in 9th grade, the one who once told me that if I ever thought about being a pastor, I should pursue it—he made a point to fly out for my seminary graduation.

What a gracious thing for him to do.

And when he arrived, he told me it was a great occasion for him. Not only to attend the graduation.

But also, he could see an old friend.

And you know who that old friend was?

The very same professor—who I had criticized in her class evaluation just a few days earlier.

I guess they knew each other from being in the same PhD program together.

Whew...maybe that's why I didn't want to preach today.

Even three decades later, I don't want to know if, when they had their lunch, that former professor of mine said anything about me.

That casually cruel evaluation...it wasn't who I was.

It wasn't who I wanted to be.

“I do not do the good I want...”

I heard those words, and I thought to myself—Paul’s not talking to the church in Rome.

He’s talking to ME!

Or maybe...the reason I didn’t want to preach on Paul’s theology of sin was not about you and not about me.

Maybe it was about Paul.

Maybe I don’t have the CAPACITY...
to swallow and digest and understand—
the depths that Paul is going to
when he describes the power of sin.

For Paul, sin is not just a series of bad choices.
Or even just an instinct.
It’s a force. A power.
Something outside of us that entraps us and imprisons us.

“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

Did you notice that THAT verse is a bit different than what I quoted earlier?

Verse 15 goes like this:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

And verse 19 is what I just read:

“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

Did you catch the difference?

The second time, Paul says “evil.”

The EVIL I didn’t want to do is what I did.

Evil?

It’s one thing to say that you and I are sinners.

How many of you, show of hands, joined in our prayer of confession this morning?

Right. No problem admitting that we sin.

But how often do you and I confess to evil?

Because that’s a strong word, right?

Much stronger than sin.

Evil is about the worst of the worst.

When the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich was released in a prisoner exchange last month, there was a palpable sense of relief, right?

After all, he had been sentenced to serve 16 years in prison colony for a crime he did not commit. A reporter, doing his job, spends 491 days in a Russian jail.

That’s not just wrong. It’s evil.

Vladimir Putin perpetrates evil all the time.

That’s why I have a hard time with this verse.

Because Paul isn’t Putin!

So why did Paul say, “...the evil I do not want is what I do”???

It's almost as if Paul is suggesting that ANYONE is capable of evil, and ANYONE can be responsible for evil, even if they don't realize at the time that what they're doing is evil.

Maybe this is the reason I did not want to preach this sermon.
Because Paul is not drawing the lines where I wish he would draw them with this text.

He's not saying...the good guys are over here.
And the bad guys...are over there.
He's drawing the line...RIGHT HERE.

Speaking of soviet prisons, I'm reminded of someone who did serve many years in the Soviet gulag: the Russian dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

And do you know what Solzhenitsyn wrote from the Soviet gulag?

“Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states,
nor between classes,
nor between political parties...
but right through every human heart.”²

That's a tough place to go.
And it's where Paul takes us today.
But not just Paul.
I wonder if you noticed the last hymn we're singing this morning:
“Amazing Grace.”

² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Part IV, Chapter 1, as quoted in a sermon by Fleming Rutledge, “The Enemy Lines Are Hard to Find,” in her book, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

I suspect that many if not most of you know the story behind that hymn. How John Newton, in the 18th century, led a life that by his own account was filled with “dangers, toils, and snares,” including his participation in the slave trade.

He narrowly missed death on any number of occasions throughout his life. It was a storm at sea that brought him to “the hour he first believed.”

But even after that hour, he continued with the slave-trade. And it was only decades later that he came out forcefully against it.³

How did he do that?

How did that evil get transformed in his heart?

Not by his own goodness.

Not by his own wisdom.

Not through the strength of his spirit.

It was the Spirit of God...

Hmmm....

I’m almost out of time with this sermon.

This sermon I didn’t want to preach.

And to review, I’ve listed three reasons why I didn’t want to preach it:

You. Me. And Paul.

But here’s the thing.

³ A good summary of John Newton’s life and the song, “Amazing Grace,” can be found at [The Creation of "Amazing Grace" | Articles and Essays | Amazing Grace | Digital Collections | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#)

In the end, today's text isn't just you.
 And it's not just about me.
 And it's not just about Paul.

It's about God.

Paul's theology of sin can only be understood through the lens of the love and light of God.

Paul writes:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

You know what that means, right?

It means that the CAPACITY of God—
 to forgive any sin,
 to redeem any evil,
 to save any child of God...
 is beyond OUR ability to grasp.

But it's still very REAL.

And that means something very specific for each of you.
 It means...you are not trapped by your past.
 It means...you are not the worst thing you've ever done.

It means you're not defined by your illness.
 Or by the dysfunctional family in which you were raised.
 You are not defined by how nice your home looks,
 or by all the money you might have made.

You are defined by God's unfathomable love and inexplicable grace.

Those are the only gifts that get the final word in your life.
That's what Paul is telling us today.

And you know what else it means?
It means that the very same thing is true for the person who
wounded you this past week.

Only the love of God gets the final word with that person.

And it's true for the guards who locked Evan Gershkovich's cell
each night.

And it's true for Colt Gray, who did that horrific thing in Georgia
10 days ago.

And it's true for Judas who betrayed Jesus.
And Peter who denied Jesus.
And it's true for all the disciples who ran from Jesus.
It's even true for the Romans who put the nails in Jesus.

And it's true for this zealous Pharisee who used to imprison and
persecute God's church before he, Paul, became one of the greatest
apostles of God's church.

In other words, according to Paul, the grace and love of God can
get behind every defense, it can open any lock, it will reach people and
go places and do things that are far, far beyond our capacity to fathom...

So what do you think?
I almost didn't preach this sermon.

But then, in this text, I ran across...
the unfathomable love of God,
and the untamable grace of God,

and the incomprehensible capacity of God's
goodness and generosity to reach
ABSOLUTELY ANYONE...

Are those good enough reasons to preach this sermon?

(Amen.)