

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 9
Year A

Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-15
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I am sure we can all relate to Paul's dilemma of not doing what we know we should do and doing those things which we should not be doing. I know I can surely relate. It might be something as simple as not doing the "honey-do's" we have been putting off for days or not getting the exercise our doctor thinks we should get. It might be more significant – like not registering to vote or not starting the prayer discipline we said we would begin. There are many good things we know we should do that never seem to get done.

The same might be true about the other side of Paul's issue – doing things we know we should not do. Again, there are the simple things – eating too much sugary treats or taking the elevator when taking the stairs would be better for us. I will let you fill in more, but we can all relate to what Paul is saying. What do we do about it?

One important rule that we might take for the gospel reading is to not listen to the critics around us. There are plenty of people who want to tell all about our shortcomings. John was too austere – therefore he was a lunatic. Jesus liked table fellowship – therefore He was a glutton. We can never satisfy everyone.

However, unlike small children, we must take responsibility for our actions and inactions. We know what we are supposed to do, but the more we strive to do what is right, the more we feel under attack. It's like we can never be good enough. Paul states this in verse 21 as feeling evil is close at hand. Wherever we look, we see public figures (including too many clergy) who show they have feet of clay. Perhaps we take pleasure in seeing the proud fall. But humility might be the answer.

One commentator likened this passage to an AA meeting. "Hi, my name is Paul and I am a sinner." One of the important steps in AA is humility – to acknowledge we can't fix the problem by ourselves. Paul's point in the reading is that we cannot solve the problem on our own. Doing the right thing apart from God is a losing battle. It is not that we are weak, or lazy, or not trying hard enough. We must realize that there are forces at work in and around us that are stronger than we think. As it says in scripture, the will may be strong, but the flesh rules.

Does this mean we have no chance – we might as well give up and live the high life? No. Paul assures us that we are not alone in this struggle. All of us share the same battle. One of the reasons we tend to go it alone in this struggle is that we are convinced that we are the worst offenders – nobody is as bad as I am and if they find out how bad I really am, I will lose all of my friends. Paul would have us to understand is that, yes, we are a mess, but so is everyone else. We can rejoice that that pressure is off us.

Paul doesn't wallow in his sinfulness. He knows he can't prevail on his own. Thus, he ends this passage with a glimpse of the cure for our condition. "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus our Lord!" That is the cure – that we place all of our cares, our worries, our shortcomings into the hands of Jesus. That is where our liberation comes from. It is in Jesus Christ that we are set free every time we feel that we can't do what we know we should do or when we are doing those things that we know we should not do. Jesus is the answer.