

“Come Unto Me” Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner

Romans 7: 19-25a; Matthew 11: 28-30

Last week, on the morning of the fourth, Brian and I drove out to the dog beach to do some kayaking. On the way, starting at about the Green Bridge, we found ourselves, as we often do, in the midst of a theological discussion. That day, it was about evolution, and how we both suspect that the next big leap in the evolution of our species will be ethical and spiritual in nature. How in our native, Christian terms, we both believe, that slowly, excruciatingly slowly, which is how evolution always works, we as a species are evolving into creatures of greater love, justice and inclusion; in short, how we are growing more and more like Christ. You see, I believe Christ embodied, along with other special prophets over the millenia, the kind of spiritually evolved wholeness we are talking about here. I believe we have seen instances of the next phase of evolution pop up here and there, as harbingers of what is to come, in the likes of Christ and Ghandi and the Buddha and Dr. King, etcetera. And don't we long for it? In a thousand unnamed stirrings of the soul whereby we think, just for a minute, that we are glimpsing something glorious just beyond the horizon, don't we have a foretaste in our marrow that the arc of the universe does indeed bend toward justice, toward love as the guiding ethic, and justice as its practical implication? And don't we feel that longing individually too? Don't we have a longing for ourselves to be healed of illness and addiction

and personality flaws that weigh us down and work against our own evolution?

Our own ego minds that cause us so much trouble.

Indeed, the problem is that we are stuck in the end of Romans chapter seven. That chapter where Paul so viscerally and accurately describes “the human condition” of struggling mightily with ourselves. “Why do I do the very thing I don’t want to do, and not do what I know is right?” Paul’s struggle is so like ours, isn’t it? I love the humanity of this passage. I could’ve written it myself. Why can’t I get free from the temptations that I know compromise my own well being? From the mental habits that hurt myself and others? From the rapid fire, compulsive thinking that creates scenarios in my head that may not come close to matching reality, but in which I participate, even if only in my own compulsive thought life? Why can’t I reign in the unkind judgement, the harsh word, the fears that cause me to draw in rather than reach out? Sound familiar? And aren’t you, like me, kind of sick of the same old struggles? Somebody once said that the purpose of the gospel, is, in part, to help us get good and sick of ourselves; good and bored with the same, old stuff, such that we are good and open to a new, spiritual way of living.

Now let me offer an important disclaimer here. When I encourage us to get honest with what we might call our “lower nature,” with what Paul calls sin, I am not suggesting that we use it as an excuse to wallow in guilt or shame. Indeed,

religion has too often used what Paul, in Romans 7 indeed called sin, and which might more aptly for our times be called “human struggle” in the growth toward wholeness; religion has used this as a hammer to judge and shame and berate its people. I’m not suggesting that. In fact, to the contrary, we need to accept as an essential part of the process, the struggling from which we continue to be transformed. Any new artistic creation must, after all, go through a time of chaos and maybe even ugliness before it can emerge into a work of art. Maybe we are like that too. So the point here is not to berate ourselves or others for our humanness, but to love that very humanness right in the midst of its transformation, knowing that God loves us as we are, right in the midst of the mud and the spit as well. Paul Tillich says it beautifully in one of my favorite of his passages, from his famous sermon entitled “You Are Accepted:”

“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys

all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!” If that happens to us, we experience grace.”

Grace, it seems to me, comes right between our two scriptures for today. Right at the point where Paul is most tired of his same, old struggle with himself, where he says, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” It is there that we hear our second passage for today give the answer: Jesus says, “Come unto me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Grace. Acceptance. Yes, we still have the same process of spiritual evolution with which to keep tangling, but now, because we know we are already loved and accepted in the midst of our struggle, the burden is bearable. We are like the women from undeveloped countries who have to walk miles for water, and carry the vessel on their heads. When they find the right balance, they can carry even the full vessel in ways that are easy by comparison to the way you or I would carry it. Based on God’s love and our self-acceptance, we find some grace and ease and

maybe even levity with ourselves and our burdens. And then there is room for God or life or the Universe or whatever you call it, to keep using the raw material of life toward our own spiritual evolution. And bit by tiny bit, we continue to grow into our own wholeness, after the model of Jesus Christ.

And the really good part is that as this happens, across the world, through diverse religious, spiritual or just regular moral practice, as more and more people evolve slowly, then the law of love and the rule of justice can more readily flourish in community. Secure in God's love for all, we can more faithfully reach out to include the disenfranchised and outcast, the broken and the estranged, the fearful and the broken. And we can more readily build communities of peace and justice and love. Bit by bit, glimpse by glimpse, transformation by transformation, we are building glimpses of this Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

But its a long and tedious process, spiritual evolution. So take heart in the words of the great theologian Teilhard De Chardon who said,

“Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;

your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time...
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.”
— **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**

And then, continues De Chardin,

““Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall
harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of
the world, humans will have discovered fire.”