

3 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9 – Year A – July 6, 2011 - Homily
Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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The well-known TV sitcom, *Friends*, unexpectedly covers one of the most fascinating and difficult passages that we find in Paul's letter to the Romans tonight. The episode finds Phoebe exploring the issue of whether it is truly possible to do a selfless deed in this world. Her foil in the episode is Joey, who argues that "all good deeds are really selfish, because they make the person doing them feel good." Phoebe spends the rest of this episode determined to commit a purely selfless deed. In the end, she admits that it may not be possible. After hearing Paul's complex and convoluted argument, we're probably all left wondering what's going on here. We're basically good people, right? Yet Paul tells us that even when we really want to do good, the power of sin is so much a part of us that it can distort our best intentions and our best efforts.

One of the most common errors we all fall into is to compare ourselves with others, especially when it comes to the infamous peccadilloes of politicians, and high profile religious leaders that have become so popular in the news. When we're completely honest with ourselves and with God, the kind of rueful pride we take in our utterance of such phrases as "Oh, how the mighty have fallen", secretly leaves us all feeling a little better about our own lives, and our own failures. Believe me; I'm just as human as the next person, and I'm certainly not perfect. One of the points Paul is making here is that actually none of us is. Having said that, and after hearing this long list of "I" statements from Paul, we might not be quite so happy to realize that Paul is using the Greek rhetoric of his day to share a complex theological point about all of humanity, and not just himself, specifically.

In theological and biblical circles, this particular reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome is still hotly debated. It does seem likely though that the source of Paul's argument can be traced back to the first chapter of Romans, and the whole of humanity's failure to obey God and remain God-centered. Adam's sin – the sin that dwells within each of us – is that we have turned away from God-centeredness to self-centeredness. Author and scholar Paul Minear puts it this way: "What does the apostle see as the deepest, most stubborn root of sin, the root from which all sinning springs? What leaves [people] without excuse? How do we become fools with darkened minds? How do [people] suppress the truth?... The answer ... is the same, 'They did not honor [God] as God or give thanks to him.'" Paul's understanding of sin is not specifically about disobedience to a set of rules, which we think of as the Law or God's commandments, but rather the distortion of a relationship. More specifically, at the heart of our sinfulness is a distorted relationship with God that leads us to selfish desires in all aspects of our lives. In other words, in turning away from God, humanity opened the door to sin and death in the world.

According to Paul, this is everyone's problem. It is the reason that the power of sin has swept through the world, and why we ask for forgiveness on a daily basis. Sin is like a lens that bends God's good light, leaving us with a distorted image of others and ourselves. Sin bends our perspective, even to the point that when we intend to do good things, the power of sin can distort those deeds. In effect, we're all trapped as if we walked right into a patch of quicksand. The harder we try to fix it or escape from the quicksand the faster we go under, simply because we can't save ourselves. The good news that Paul shares with us is that by God's grace and our faith in Jesus Christ, we are saved from the bondage of sin and death, not by our own efforts, but by the life and

work of Jesus, our Lord. It is a daily quest to surrender to the Lord and accept forgiveness for our sins. Having coming to the Lord in faith, we don't suddenly become perfect overnight. It takes time for the Holy Spirit to work within us to free us from the power of sin. It's a process called life – or in theological terms – a path of sanctification, or our transformation to Christ-likeness.

Ultimately, Paul's message is about having the humility to accept our sinfulness and selfishness to the point where we are willing to surrender our lives to Christ Jesus, and allow Him to pull us from the quagmire. Sanctification is also a cleansing and a healing, correcting our focus towards God, away from our very human bent towards darkness and self-centeredness. It is yet another aspect of God's good gifts to us through our freedom in Christ. As we have proved over the last ten days through VBS; through serving a family in mourning; through offering generous hospitality to thirty-five cyclists; and showing off our many ministries in the 4th of July parade; so many of us are "can do" type of people, and so many of us have adopted the Avis car rental company motto, "We try harder". It's laudable to give of ourselves in service to God and Christ Jesus. It's commendable to try to please God in all we do and say. Just as long as we realize that our first priority is to surrender ourselves to God's love and mercy, every day. And to give thanks to God every day for God's goodness, God's love, and God's presence in our hearts, and in our lives. I bet we've all had days when we are lost in ourselves, or stuck in our own agendas. Days that are so busy we fail to honor God as we should with deep gratitude. I know this is true for me. And I know that when I look back on those days, they are the ones that are most often filled with frustration. Things are not in synch, I'm not in balance, and its easy to get irritable. The Lord has a way of reminding me of Who is really in charge.

On the other hand, when I stay centered in prayer and thanksgiving, my life becomes exactly what God promises. It is filled with blessings and the abundance of His grace. I find the strength to do the work God has given me to do. The bottomless well of God's love keeps me refreshed, joyful, and at peace. I know we've all experienced both scenarios. As Paul points out, our best friend is Jesus. Our song is and always will be one of thanksgiving to God in Christ Jesus. At the heart of our life in our community of faith is the Holy Eucharist or Great Thanksgiving, in which, and through which, we are strengthened by Christ's body and blood. The opening words of the Eucharistic feast are an invitation to lift up our hearts to God, and to give thanks to the Lord our God. It's a reminder that we take with us and hold in our hearts every day of the week. It's the reminder that Paul wishes to draw to our attention. God's great redeeming work is ongoing, and it is by God's grace and our faith in Christ Jesus that we are saved.

Amen.