

Trinity United Methodist Church

August 30, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Romans 7:14-25 (NIV)

14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. **15** I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. **16** And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. **17** As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. **18** For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. **19** For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. **20** Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. **21** So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. **22** For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; **23** but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. **24** What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? **25** Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Sermon

First of all, I’d like to thank all of you who have made my time away from Trinity possible, especially our incredible church staff and especially Richard Winfree. There is a lot of work behind the scenes to put things together, to keep our technology running, and so forth and so on, and he has done an excellent job with that. Also, JoAnn Hall, who chaired our Healthy Church Team and helped us get back to in-person worship and has shepherded that process along the way. To Nancy, our Lay Leader, and all those who have helped us in all kinds of ways. Kim, who’s done a fantastic job keeping our children connected. Bekah, who’s been holding down all kinds of forts with me being out as well. I wasn’t completely away for six weeks – she would have killed me – but still.

I’m excited for the growth that has happened in the time that I’ve been gone and overall increase in in-person worship attendance, but also with adding the Rivers of Life worship service component and the great response that we’ve had to that. That has been wonderful as well. I also want to say “hello,” still, to those of you worshipping at home. That is still just as viable a choice, to remain safer at home. We look forward to the day

when we can all worship together. Even those who tune in from out of town, welcome as well.

I want to say a special “thank you” to my friend, Greg. Greg, if you’re watching still, if you haven’t gotten enough of us here at Trinity, thank you. Greg is also a great friend and colleague. Yes, Greg is more of an what we call an *expository* preacher. He preaches more verse-by-verse, if you couldn’t tell. I try to do more of what we call a *narrative* style of preaching, and it works for some people, and some people prefer Greg’s style of preaching. That’s why I invite him to come when I’m out. We all have different strengths and gifts, and that’s a wonderful thing in the body of Christ.

So what I want to share with you is a word of testimony of what God has been revealing to me and how God has continued to pour out His grace and goodness into my life. Not for sympathy; not to complain; but to be transparent and honest as your pastor. And my prayer is that something in the most recent chapter of my life might speak to your story and your life and aid you in your journey of faith. So let’s get started. Let us pray together.

Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Five months ago now, our world was turned upside down by COVID-19. There have been so many unknowns. There has been such a rapid and severe pace of change affecting all levels of our lives. And all change, whenever and however it happens, whether we view it as good or bad—*all* change involves loss. And friends, we lost a lot. Chief of which, for me, is we’ve lost any sense of rhythm or routine that we once had. It’s as if we had all the game pieces of life arranged “just so,” and we were positioned to make what we thought was our next move as individuals, as families, as a church, as a nation—and then COVID came along and smacked the game board and all the pieces went flying.

The truth of the matter is that for so many of us, before COVID struck, life was tenuous at best. Many of us were already dealing with all kinds of issues and problems. Health, finances, relationships, jobs, and more. And for those of us that *thought* we had it all together, that we were in control—Well, COVID has certainly shown us how much we are definitely *not* in control of our own lives.

For us churchgoers, we lost the comfort of church. Of worshipping together, of serving together, of fellowship together. Of seeing our friends and loved ones. All of that was taken away from us, too. And I want to say, your staff has felt that loss. We’ve racked our brains with how to get creative. How to do church online. How to do church socially distantly. How to embrace new ways of doing things while maintaining some of

the old comforts, because comfort is a thing that we need right now. How to meet needs. How to equip the saints (that's you all, by the way) to meet some of your own needs. All this while also worrying about our own livelihoods. If church is closed, what does that mean for us?

And so much of all of this has been behind the scenes that the average church person doesn't see. Friends, we've been hurting also. And I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt, I could not ask for anything more from our church staff during these times.

COVID has been shining this magnifying glass, concentrating the light and the heat, like a kid does with a magnifying glass in the bright sunlight on a worm or a bug or something like that. Maybe a blade of grass if you don't want to kill one of God's creatures. COVID's been shining this magnifying glass, concentrating the heat of that light on all of our cracks and all of our weaknesses and all of our lives. At least that's what it's felt like to me.

And so, I don't know about you, but I found myself defaulting to patterns and rhythms and ways of dealing with stress and conflict and anxiety and so forth that are part of who I am, but aren't healthy for myself or for those in my life, including you here at Trinity. I recognize that I'd actually been doing so for at least the last few years as I've dealt with loss and change and stress in my own life. And now that this magnifying glass of COVID was bearing down on me, friends, I was being consumed. I was hurting more than ever before, and it's a truth across the board that hurting people hurt people. **Hurting people hurt people**, by the things we do and the things we don't do.

And so over these last five months, COVID forced me to see the signs of burnout that I've experienced before in life and ministry. That since then I've learned to recognize those signs that lead to burnout. My fuse was getting shorter. I was losing interest in my job, in things in life. I was "phoning it in," and I was going through the motions—in life, in ministry, in marriage, and more. And for a long time now, for years, I really haven't felt like myself. Like something has been missing.

Now you all probably know that in 2016 I started my Doctor of Ministry degree through Asbury Seminary, and you might be thinking, "Good golly, if you're already going through so much, why are you adding more stress to your life?" Well, let me tell you, the timing of that was indeed providential. Because the program through Asbury Seminary is much more focused on spiritual formation of pastors and leaders and churches than the academic work. It kept me from going further off track than I might have otherwise, while at the same time the spiritual attacks definitely increased.

So you might have heard that I am, as they say in academics, ABD—All But Dissertation—meaning I've completed all the coursework. All of that is behind me. I've

just got to get the stupid thing done. So all of what I've shared so far contributed to what I like to call a "lack of bandwidth," which greatly contributes to my lack of focus, which is already a problem, with a diagnosis of adult ADD.

So in the beginning of this year I thought about taking a study leave this summer. There are provisions in the Discipline for pastors to do so, because the more that we continue to learn and develop, the better off our churches can be. And then COVID hit. Talk about lack of bandwidth. I forgot all about the idea of taking leave until summer was approaching. And when I brought it up to church leadership, the biggest pushback was, "What bad timing." Yeah. I know. We're trying to get in-person worship off the ground and running. We're trying to get back on track as a church. And the pastor wants to take off *how long?* I know. I know.

I presented it as a study leave to get significant work done on the dissertation, and I told friends, told my wife, "It's a matter of if I want to graduate this May, I *have* to take this time." But friends, what I soon realized, was that if I wanted to *thrive* during this time, much less *survive* in ministry, in marriage, in life, I *had* to take a break, before I had a break. Especially after an untimely death related to our congregation, in our community, I realized I had absolutely nothing left to give anybody.

So this time away was truly a gift that this church has given me, and I thank you so much for it. Yes, I did get a significant amount of work done on the dissertation and the research aspect of it. But the greater work that was done during this time was in me. I slept a lot at first. My first step was to find a counselor, a therapist, and boy, friends, have I found a good one. God's hand is all over it. Somebody who is not letting me get away with easy answers, who is prying and pushing all my buttons in ways that hurt and are horrible, but at the same time it's just like a Shiatsu massage. *Oh, that hurts, but ahh, it feels good.* He's given me homework to work on some things. It's not easy work by any means. It will continue for some time to come, but I can already tell that it's going to be so worth it.

I got away to Camp Overlook twice, one of our United Methodist camps here in Virginia. And I hit "reset" on my spiritual life and on my prayer life. God brought back to mind for me something that used to help my prayer life, was to imagine when I sat down to pray in my recliner in the morning, or at the kitchen table, or wherever the case might be, to imagine Jesus literally sitting there with me. Kicked back with his feet up on the couch or wherever the case might be. To imagine Jesus sitting there across the table from me and to just simply talk with Him like I would with a friend. And then in turn to hear what Jesus might want to say back to me. And so, I'm glad to say that I'm finding myself hanging out with Jesus again.

I reconnected, also, with the theory of emotional health. Or you might have heard it described more lately in leadership literature as “emotional intelligence.” It’s all about paying attention. Not only paying attention to our emotions that we’ll often just stuff under the rug and hope they’ll go away. To actually pay attention to them and take just a step back in the moment and ask, “Why am I feeling this way?” A lot of times we’re angry, right? That’s the most common one. A lot of times we’re angry. To step back and ask yourself, “Wait a minute. *Why* am I angry right now? Am I disappointed? Have I been wronged? Am I jealous?” And then we’re better able to deal with those underlying emotions, when we acknowledge them and we work on them.

It’s about managing my own anxiety so that I’m not passing mine onto others, who are already anxious about something else on their own, who then pass on to somebody else, who’s already anxious about something else. And then we end up in this huge anxious mess together. As a family, as a church, it’s what’s happening in our nation right now.

It was in this context that I was drawn, again, to our passage from Romans chapter 7. I’ve always sort of identified with Paul, particularly in this passage. And I paraphrase it to say, “I want to do good, but no matter how hard I try, I don’t. And I know what I’m *supposed* to do. I know what I’m *not* supposed to do. But no matter how hard I try, I go and do it anyway.” And I’ve always read this passage in light of the struggle with temptation, and that’s a big part of it, certainly. It’s part of our big sinful nature. Often we don’t *want* something until what? We’re told that we can’t have it, right? Or we don’t want to do something that we’re told to do unless we get the idea that it was our idea to begin with, and then, lo and behold—wives, you know about this with your husbands, right? Once they think it was their idea, then they go ahead and do it.

But this time I came to this passage with the primary question that I am wrestling with right now. *Why am I the way that I am? Why do I default to responding to stress and anxiety and change and conflict in the ways that I always do? I don’t want to respond that way. I know how I should respond, but no matter how hard I try, I keep doing the same things over and over. Why?*

Keep that frame in mind, and now hear this passage again as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*: “Yes. I’m full of myself—after all, I’ve spent a long time in sin’s prison. What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t do it. I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as

they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it is predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me wants to join in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different."

Hear these lines again: "Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time." "I've tried everything and nothing helps." "I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?" "The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does."

What am I talking about here? Maybe you've noticed that people who are sometimes negative or maybe even usually negative have become even more negative in this time of COVID. People who were sometimes anxious and worrisome are even more so now. People who like being the center of attention have turned into flat-out divas. People who used to have a short fuse seem like *everything* sets them off now. People who *can* be critical seem to now be nit-picking *everything*. Addicts that have been clean and sober for such a long time are suddenly relapsing, if not at least on the verge. I'm sure you can think of more examples. Maybe you might have noticed similar patterns in your own life during this time of COVID, when the magnifying glass is bearing down upon us.

You know what you *should* be doing, how you *should* be responding. In a better way, in a more uplifting way, in a more positive way. And you might resolve to do so for about that long, but then before we know it we're right back to our old ways. No matter how hard we try, those old ways return.

Paul says it's because we're slaves to sin, but another way to say it is because we're slaves to what we know. Maybe we've learned this behavior from others, often in our families. Maybe it's attributed to trauma in our lives. But whatever the reason, it's there. It's part of who we are. And then when we realize it, we don't want to be that way any more, do we? I hope we don't. So what do we typically do? Friends, I can't tell you how many times I've promised to myself and my kids that I won't yell at them any more. *But those little buggers just love to push my buttons...you know how it is.* I can't tell you how many times I've promised to myself and my wife, I won't give in to that temptation any more. Isn't that what we do? We buck up. We buckle down. We try harder. And then when we slip up again, we beat ourselves up and we try harder again, and then we fall again and we beat ourselves up. "I'm sorry, God," and we try harder and try harder and

try harder, and we become trapped in the cycle of shame and of guilt. And we're powerless to overcome it on our own.

No matter how hard we try, we cannot do it. The more we try, in fact, the worse off we are. And friends, none of us are going to get any better at it. If we're going to really live, even thrive, through this time of COVID, we've got to start by admitting it, like Paul does. *I've tried everything, and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.*

From here Paul launches into one of the best chapters of the Bible, Romans chapter 8, saying, "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. When we're in Jesus, we break free of that cycle of guilt and shame. And because you belong to Him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death."

We can and should get great help from mental health resources such as therapy and medicine, even, if it's determined that we need it. There is no shame in that. But we've got to give it to Jesus.

COVID is shining that bright light through that magnifying glass on all of our weaknesses and shortcomings and sin at all levels. We've got to give it to Jesus. I don't believe God caused the virus. But I believe God is *using* this virus to bring us back to Him. We've got to give it to Jesus and we've got to get the help that we need.

At the Council meeting when my leave was approved, someone shared, "You know, it's nice that you *get* this kind of opportunity, Pastor." And I heard what they were saying. It's harder for y'all. You don't have that kind of provision written into your job. I get that. Is it hard to find the space and the help that we need to deal with our own "stuff?" Yes, it is hard. Is it impossible? Didn't somebody say in the Bible that *nothing is impossible with God?*

Gregory the Great, the great sixth-century monk-become-Pope, said: "The dawn intimates that the night is over. But it does not yet proclaim the full light of day. Are not all of us who follow the truth in this life, both daybreak and dawn? We do some things which already belong to the light, but we are not free from the remnants of darkness. It will be fully day for the church when she is no longer darkened by the shadow of sin. It will be fully day for her when she shines with the perfect brilliance of interior light. This dawn is an ongoing process. When the dawn has come, the day will retain nothing but longing to the darkness of night."

And friends, in that spirit, I truly feel I am renewed. I'm chatting with Jesus again. And I truly feel that we are on the cusp of something great, as a church and more. And

at the same time, I also fully believe there is a ton of work ahead like we have never seen before. But that's why I end with most of the rest of Romans chapter 8:

“The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead lives in *you* and in *me*, and just as God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, He will give life to your mortal bodies,” with all of the *stuff* that we carry inside, “He will give life to those same bodies by the same Spirit living within. Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do.” We’ve got power over that. “For if you live by its dictates you will die, but if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s spirit when He adopted you as His own children. Now we call Him Abba, Father, for His Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that *we are God’s children*. And since we are His children, we are heirs. In fact, together with Christ, we are heirs of God’s glory. But if we share in His glory, we must also share in His suffering.”

We’re not guaranteed to be absent from suffering. “Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory He will reveal to us later. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, and we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? *If God is for us, who can ever be against us?*” Even ourselves. “Since He did not spare even His own Son, but gave Himself up for us all, will not He also give us everything else? Who dares to accuse us who God has chosen for His own? No one, for God Himself has given us rightstanding with Himself. Who then will condemn us? No one, for Christ Jesus died for us,” (and all of that *stuff*) and raised us to life, and He is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading, *pleading* for us. *Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love?*”

Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity or are persecuted or hungry or destitute or in danger or threatened with death or going a little crazy in the head? No! Despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who loves us. “*And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love, neither death nor life, angels nor demons, neither our fears for today or our worries about tomorrow. Not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.*” Certainly not any Godforsaken American politics, either.

“No power in the sky above or in the earth below. Indeed, *nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ, our Lord.*”

Friends, these promises are for you and for me. These promises are for *all of us*, and for all whom God has put in our lives, for us to influence for Him. What amazing

grace. What amazing love is this, that God does not leave us to our own devices? That no matter how bad we screw up, God still loves us. God still chooses us. God's still going to win, through the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death.

So in closing, friends, if that's the kind of grace God gives to us, especially now more than ever, let's give that same grace to each other. Let's give that same grace to ourselves. Thanks be to God.