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The ABC's of Faith H - Hate

Romans 7:15-25a NRSV I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25a Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

It may seem a startling or puzzling or unwelcome topic for this "ABC's of Faith" sermon series. Why in the world, you may be asking, is the preacher including in a sermon series about "Christian vocabulary" the topic, the concept, the word, **hate**? And you have a point: Thanks be to God, there is nothing in any of the historic church creeds, nothing in the words of Jesus, that counsels that "hate" be a part of our faith. But at the same time, we must painfully admit that too much of Christian history – even to this very moment – has sometimes acted as if hate were something to be encouraged, emulated, admired. Even today, in the Central African Republic - a story that is sadly under-reported – Christians are slaughtering Muslims, displaying a ferocity of hate that is simply awful. The Wesboro Baptist Church continues its ignominious actions by taking delight in proclaiming their hate when they picket the funerals of soldiers with those awful signs that say "God Hates Fags." And I would gently say that I

suspect that virtually every person in this room has someone who you can say you have truly hated – at least for a moment – at one point or another, a feeling that may have startled you in its intensity, but which simply overwhelmed you.

So while “hate” is indeed hardly a part of who God is or who our faith calls us to be, it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that nonetheless it has played too large a role in Christian history and it is an emotion that has visited all of us at one time or another. In today’s scripture from the Apostle Paul, he very honestly and painfully describes – doesn’t he? -- what it feels like to have this jarring juxtaposition of good and bad, intention and action, all mixed up sometimes. Did you hear what he said? *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* Eugene Petersen’s down-to-earth translation goes this way: *“What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise....I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway.”* That pretty much nails it, doesn’t it; and all of us know the feeling, don’t we? I can recall making the statement that I would never say a certain thing to my children that my parents said to me, and then being shocked to hear those precise words coming out of my mouth! Or I resolve that I won’t think hateful thoughts ever again, let alone say them.... and then there they come again! Or I have every intention of doing that good, helpful deed and somehow the week gets by and it hasn’t gotten done. How about you?

Twenty years ago, Barbara and I took a vacation through rural Missouri, staying off the interstates and taking back roads through the little towns and the rolling hills.

And as we were driving down one of those roads we saw, down in a holler, what looked to be a double-wide mobile home. Actually, as we drove closer, we saw that it was two mobile homes that had been attached together, standing on very rickety pilings, on land that looked to be washing away with each summer thunderstorm, with a little cross out in front that was all askew and leaning precariously. And as a gust of wind reached down into that holler a big chunk of that mobile-home flapped alarmingly. Now, of course, the cross was a clue but the real reason that we knew it was a church building was that up beside the road was a sign – NOT a rickety, bedraggled sign but a first-class, electrically lit sign proclaiming the name of the church: “*The Church of the Solid Rock.*” Sometimes that is what our lives feel like – as if we are holding a sign up that is so at odds with what we know is reality. Our sign may **say** one thing, but our inner selves sometimes look far different. The sign which we show to the world may be gorgeous, well-appointed, lit up, bright, clean and shiny. It may be a sign that says “*I have it all together*” but **inside** we are indeed this jumble and juxtaposition of the not-so-pure and the not-so-lovely and the not-so-beautiful – and sometimes even hateful – urges and desires and thoughts. And we hear Paul’s words and we wince a little bit because we know, we know, that he has just described us so very well. When we have that moment of recognition, when we realize how Paul’s description fits our jumbled and juxtaposed lives so well, how do we respond? Well, let me suggest three ways that all of us respond to this reality – but which are ultimately self-defeating.

First – and confessionally, for I am the first among sinners here! – sometimes I get all **defensive** when I realize or have pointed out to me that my actions aren’t matching my words, that the sign I seem to have out in front of my life is at odds with

the reality inside my life. And when I get defensive, I sometimes turn Paul's words inside-out and instead I accuse **someone else** of being dishonest and hypocritical. I re-translate, re-interpret Paul's words in my own mind this way: *"YOU do not understand YOUR own actions. For YOU do not do what YOU want, but YOU do the very thing YOU hate....For YOU do not do the good YOU want, but the evil YOU do not want is what YOU do."* It's the adult version of that childhood taunt that says *"Well, you're one too!"* The problem, of course, with this sort of reaction is two-fold: First, it's just not very effective, is it? None of our children ever had their minds changed when one of their siblings shouted at them *"Well, you're a poo-head too!"* They didn't respond, *"Gosh, you're right. I guess I am a poo-head."* But, second, and more importantly, such defensiveness simply escalated things so that neither one of them was behaving well, and neither one of them could actually see the log in their own eyes – to use Jesus' famous image – because they were so defensive.

There's a second way that you and I sometimes respond to Paul's recognition that our lives are a jumble of what we mean to do and what we really do: we simply feel guilty. In fact, we sometimes wallow in it. And, to tell the truth, sometimes it feels comfortable to feel guilty. We hear Paul's words *"I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate,"* and we think yes, yes that's me. Guilty as charged. I'm stuck. I can't move. But what happens then is that you and I substitute the fact of our guilty feelings for doing something to fix things. It is as if we make this mental trade-off: if I feel guilty *enough* about my life, my actions, my words, everything, then that very feeling is enough and I don't actually have to do anything.

Of course, the problem with this sort of response to Paul's apt description of our

sometimes mixed up and jumbled up lives is that it is **immobilizing**. Feeling guilty in this way leaves little room for anything else, little room for a better way, little energy to find a way out because the guilt consumes everything. As novelist James Baldwin once said, "*People can cry much easier than they can change.*"¹ Now don't misunderstand me. Unlike too many new age psychobabble approaches, I do believe that the feeling of guilt is something that is important, something that we should never dismiss or take lightly. I'll even put it this way: guilt is good. It's what can tell us that we indeed behaved poorly. It's what can remind us that our actions have consequences and that we need to make amends when those consequences have been hurtful. But guilt is NOT good when it becomes a *substitute* for action, when it becomes a *substitute* for change. And as understandable as it is to feel guilty in the face of Paul's correct characterization of your life and mine, **only** feeling guilty neither serves God nor us.

Now, there is a third reaction that you and I sometimes have in the face of that juxtaposition of our good intentions with our sometimes not-so-good actions, and that is to decide to be perfect. Now, put that way, of course, we can all recognize how ludicrous such a resolve is. But it's nonetheless what we sometimes decide to do. If too much guilt is immobilizing, then likewise too much resolve on our part that through sheer force of will we prove Paul wrong, that we will get our good intentions and our good actions in line with one another will prove just as dispiriting. Because it doesn't work. Can you remember your New Year's resolutions this year? Could you remember them even at the end of January? I don't know about you but there have been times in my life when I have decided that by sheer force of will I **will** get everything right, I **will**

¹ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/jamesabal149889.html>

NOT make a mistake, I will give no one the opportunity to say that my actions are inconsistent with my intentions because they will always be completely consistent.

Talk about exhausting! Talk about dispiriting! As writer and minister Hugh Prather once put it, "*Perfectionism is slow death.*"² Indeed. It doesn't work. And in the end after you or I have almost desperately tried to force ourselves to have lives where the signs on the outside always match the feelings on the inside, where no one can ever accuse us of behaving badly, we will find that we have failed. That is simply the way that it is. Neither you nor I can be perfect, and the attempt to do so, the attempt to somehow immunize ourselves from Paul's description of that juxtaposition and jumble that is life, will fail.

And that returns us, doesn't it, to Paul's lament, "*Who will rescue me from this body of death?*" But I don't want to leave it there. And, thanks be to God, neither Paul nor the gospel that he preaches leaves it there either. Paul's very simple answer, short, sweet, and succinct, is this "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Romans is a difficult book because, as someone once noted, it is simply one idea after another. It has no stories, no parables, no allegories, none of the things that make the gospels so much easier and perhaps more enticing to read. Romans is simply a theological treatise, one long series of ideas. But, oh what ideas! And to be more exact, there is really *one extended idea* that is the summation of all of the book of Romans, all of Paul's understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ: **that you and I are saved by grace and not by our works**. And that "salvation" is not just a matter of our eternal destiny, it is also a matter of being saved from futile patterns and practices right here and right

² http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/perfectionism_is_slow/191783.html

now. Now there is a seeming paradox to this “saved by grace” thing. And it is this: we are freed to do good works, to do the best we can, to go on seeking to be the best people we can be despite the fact that sometimes our lives are jumbled and juxtaposed and the signs on the outside don’t match the conditions on the inside precisely ***because we don’t have to.*** We don’t have to do so to earn God’s love. That’s already a given. Do you hear the seemingly paradoxical and yet very good news here? You don’t have to be perfect in order for God to love you – but that frees you to try to be a better person than you have been. You don’t have to simply give in to guilt and be immobilized by the way your inner and outer realities don’t match up – you can simply acknowledge those guilty feelings as a sign that God will be with you as you try to do better. You don’t have to in fear or in anger turn on other people when you realize your own shortcomings – you can be gentle with yourself and with others knowing that God indeed loves you as you are and in gentle grace calls you to be more than you are.

Like the sign on that Missouri church, the signs on the outside of our lives may sometimes not match what’s going on inside. We all have found ourselves visited by things we’d prefer weren’t the case; we all will find those moments of hate for self or others. Paul’s words indeed remind us so powerfully of that fact. But in the end is that other sign that God puts up on our lives that matters most of all: “*You are loved. You are freed. By My grace be at peace.*” **That’s** the sign that finally matters. May we know that to be so. Amen.