

The Believer's Paradox

a sermon based on

Romans 7:15-25*a* & Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

and delivered on-

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for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Have you ever found yourself in a no-win situation? Have you? A situation where there just doesn't seem to be any way to meet conflicting needs and desires without either giving up on one or even suffering in some way: have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like that no matter what you do that it's just going to bite you in the rear-end, somehow? I have. I suspect you have too.

It's such a persistent piece of the human experience that we have all sorts of expressions: a no-win or lose-lose situation, a catch-22, a double bind, caught between a rock and a hard place, a dilemma, damned if I do and damned if I don't, a conundrum. All of which refer in some way to a paradox.

We're in the middle of a world-wide paradox right now as we struggle with how to limit (and hopefully stop) the spread of a virus with the reality that we can't isolate every single human being from one another without exasperating other problems. Homeless people need shelter, but by being in close quarters they're at increased risk to their health and lives. So without a perfect solution either way, we take measures to mitigate the risk by wearing masks – not out of fear for our own safety – but in order to avoid inadvertently spreading the virus to others at risk.

It's similar to the Christian liberty regarding food, in which Paul reminds us, "Food will not bring us close to God.' We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." (1 Cor 8:8-9) So we yield our own freedom and comfort for the sake of others.

This is but one example.

There's the paradox for addict wanting to find healing and "knowing" what to do but facing the reality that turning away from the poison (There is a reason we call them intoxicants.) turning away from a poison while at the same time knowing that that very poison brings relief to the pain of withdrawal. The conflict of wanting someone to help him through but not wanting to be a weakling dependent on another.

Hear this diary entry from Mark Sloan Mark who eventually overcame his addiction and is living for the Lord:

"Sunday, October 14: I'm living on borrowed time. I really don't know how long, I'll make it. I can feel my heart beat; I just wonder how long my body can take this abuse. I'm sitting at a phone booth right now, not really sure who or why to call. I know exactly what they are going to tell me. ...

"This is so hard. It is worse than hard – when you know this is killing you and you keep on doing it. It is pure hell!!! What is so bad is that I try to think of all the people that love me and care for me. And believe me, I realize it's a lot of people. But I just can't quit right now."¹

Can you hear the paradox? He knows – he does exactly what he wants not to do. Sound familiar? Does it sound a little bit like Paul in that passage that Juanita read earlier: "For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing that I hate."? (Ro. 7:15b) Do you ever find yourself feeling like that?

Maybe it's not an addiction to drugs or alcohol, maybe it's engaging with pornography, an unhealthy relationship with food, gambling, managing anger, or trying to tame your tongue knowing that danger as James says, " the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" (Jas 3:5) This is our experience. We're not alone, even the apostles struggled with that angst.

It's complicated not only because we're inundated with advertisements showing all the good times that surround a Bud Light or glass of Maker's Mark, the mouthwatering goodness of a

¹ Robert Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 2000) 9.:

thick juicy burger or steaming hot pizza, billboards promote the "loosest slots" and even our civil authorities tout the benefits of playing the lottery and opening more casinos. The anonymity of the internet rewards the pithiest and snarkiest comments with thumbs up and share and likes.

None of it is really anything new. Maybe there are new expressions of it but it persists. The thing is our trying to overcome results in one of two outcomes: feeling like a failure or just giving in.

I'm hoping that when we are able to meet together in two weeks that I will only be obese rather than morbidly obese. I know what to do to lose weight. I've lost weight before. Then I've found it and usually a little more each time. I know what that takes. Our clergy health insurance includes some wellness features like health coaching calls and reduced membership in Weight Watchers. I haven't used them. What do I care what a stranger on the telephone has to say other than to listen for reward points? What do I care what other fat people think at a Weight Watchers meeting? I don't. It got so bad recently, that I actually started to think that maybe I should just accept being fat. But remember for me being fat was and still is morbidly (deathly) obese. It's killing me. I know that. Until I said that out loud to a health coach with whom I personally know, I was caught. Until I was asked why I wanted to be healthy – to live – and offered help to get that rather than just not being fat there were two potential outcomes: I could be a failure or I could just give up and expect people to affirm my choice.

That's another challenge we face today, and actually a paradox that we face at Christians. As Christians we want to love everybody – even if you don't, as a Christian, you should really want that for yourself. But darn it all, sometimes that means we can't just affirm poor choices or bad behaviors. It's complicated by a skewed worldview that tells us that it's not only okay for people to yield to proclivities against nature and God's word, but that it's hurtful or harmful to merely tolerate or ignore those things that are destroying lives when we should be offering positive affirmation. By no means should we be mean-spirited and hateful or dismissive of anyone, for we ourselves do not do what we want and do the very things that we hate. Right?

These are the voices – the childish voices of the world – who as Cyril of Alexandria wrote about in the 5th century referring to that passage from Matthew which we just heard: "When children are dancing and others are singing a dirge their purpose does not agree. Both sides find fault with their friends for not being in harmony with them."² The childish voices that called John possessed because he fasted and refrained from drinking, but would call the Son of Man a glutton and drunkard because he ate and drank. (Mt 11:16-19) Right? Which is it? Even Jesus knew that he couldn't win with everyone.

As Christians – as believers, this is our paradox we want to do good things and avoid sin, but we fail and we know that pains God. Or if we're successful, we risk self-confidence rather than trust in Jesus. If we're successful, we're told that it turns people off to church. If we were only more like the world and accepting of everything the world offers, then we could spread the love better. But can we? Jesus faced his dilemma head-on, living out the advice that he gave to us in Matthew 6 to beware of practicing our piety (whether that be in how we pray, or fast, or give to charity) not in a way that seeks approval from others but merely in an effort to please God – and not for reward but out of thankful love.

There's a reason that Jesus says that his yoke is easy and that his burden is light, even though it doesn't always seem that way or sound that way in Scripture. If it befuddles you a bit, you're not alone. Way back in the 4th century Apollinarius of Laodicea asked, "If the yoke is easy and

² Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 1-13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1a (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 225.

the burden is light, why did he call 'the way' 'narrow'?³ He's referring to that passage in Matthew 7:13-14 in which Jesus says, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

A "yoke" just sounds like a burden; but it really isn't. A yoke was used to tether two oxen together so that they could accomplish what neither could on its. The yoke empowered them to do more; but success depended on one condition. They actually had to work together. If one ox pulled one way and the other another, they would find themselves weaving all over creating a wide path to uselessness. But when they worked together, and the weaker ox yielded to stronger more capable ox, he became more capable than he could be on his own.

The yoke is what kept them close. That's Jesus' invitation to us, to stay close to him and to follow his lead because he can actually lead us to where we want to be, so that his yoke might ease the hard road leading to life. It doesn't mean that the road won't still be difficult. It doesn't mean that we won't stumble and trip. It doesn't mean that we'll never face discomfort when we pull against the yoke or even by kicking a rock in our way. What it does mean is that he will hold us up on that wooden beam and that as long as we keep yoked our little digressions will be corrected.

That can be uncomfortable. Maybe I'm just speaking for myself, but I doubt it. As hard as I try to be good and to resist those temptations that keep calling out to me, I can't help but feel like an awful failure for how often I either succumb or contemplate just giving in. Sometimes I even wonder "should I even ask for forgiveness now or wait." I don't want to exceed his mercy. It reminds me that when I'm yoked to him that I can't avoid seeing and bumping up against the wounds on his hands and feet and in his side. How can I expect forgiveness when I've done what I've done even though I knew that he went to the cross because of that.

But this Jesus is the same one who told his disciples not to limit their forgiveness of one another to seven times or even seventy times but seventy times seven, (Mt 18:22) just for a start. If the Son of God could expect that of us, how much more can we expect that of him?

What he's calling us to do is to yoke ourselves to one another, to yield to the others' need and weakness, and to live in love for one another so that we help each other stay on track not on our own or by our own devices and wisdom, but by daring to trust him confident that no matter the temptation, he refuses to allow us to be challenged by more than we can resist, (1 Cor 10:13) when we claim the yoke that leads us to freedom. That is the believer's paradox, we find our freedom – as Paul alludes we are rescued – not by our own strength and wisdom, but by yielding to Jesus and binding ourselves to him. AMEN.

³ Ibid. 232.