

Third Sunday After Pentecost  
July 3, 2011  
Reverend Julio Cruz-Natal, Pastor  
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: Zechariah 9:9-12, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

### Conundrums

Our readings today would seem to have a number of conundrums, impossible situations to solve, dilemmas, riddles. Take for example the portion of Paul's letter that says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate (Romans 7:15). As it reads on the caption at the top of the reading in the bulletin: Life enslaved under sin is a catch-22 existence in which we know good but do not do it and do things we know to be bad.

I've always been mystified by what Paul's intended meaning was with this reading. Was there something bothering Paul about himself? Was he struggling with something he found difficult to reconcile with his religious beliefs? Or maybe he is experiencing what Saint John of the Cross called the "dark night of the soul." Martin Luther will also refer to that condition in the life of the believer when you know yourself to be so prone to sin that you can never feel sure of your own salvation. Like Martin Luther, maybe Paul also had difficulty finding peace on account of his own sinful nature. In any case, the potential answers to those questions are probably too many to enumerate. But it would seem that Paul found it to be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to fulfill all the requirements of the law all the time. Martin Luther called that the captivity of the human nature to sin.

Isn't that what happens many times with children? I don't necessarily mean sin, but that often children know right from wrong, but have a hard time controlling their impulses. I know it happened to me. My grandfather had a shack in the back of the house where he kept his tools. I knew it was off limits, but I just couldn't resist the temptation of going in there to play. There were nuts, and bolts, and screws and all kind of fun stuff to play with, so I just did in spite of the very clear instruction that it was forbidden. I kept doing it until one day I got a big gash on one of my hands while playing with a saw. Of course, it was bound to happen. The real sad part is that, in spite of the learned lesson, I still found it difficult to not go there. The point is that even as a child I already knew the dynamics of this passage of Romans. I know what is right, but I just can't help myself to do it. It's like something else had dominion over my will. It was something else making me do it.

So again, is that what Paul meant with this passage? Because we can't control ourselves we get to blame something or someone else? "The devil made me do it! It's not my fault." We would be wrong to take this passage as an easy answer to justify or even explain our own selfish behaviors. That in itself could be more dangerous than the argument that I have a proclivity to sin. That would be an attempt to avoid our responsibility. And still what we have here is more than just a *mea culpa*. What we have here is a prayer, a cry for help, a recognition of our infidelity and a subsequent confession that we are utterly dependent on God. "Wretched man that I am" says Paul. "Who will rescue me?"

Who will liberate me from death? Who will lead me away from disaster? Paul recognizes that he can't do it on his own.

Still, he doesn't stop there as in "oh, well, there's nothing I can do about it." Yes, we have a propensity to do what we know is wrong, but that doesn't mean that there's no solution. Again, Martin Luther kept looking and looking for a solution to his dilemma. He was not able to be at peace. Hard as he tried, his efforts were not enough. When he finally decided that it was all in God's hands, then and only then, he could let go of his anxiety. "Who will rescue me" Paul asks. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" In essence, it is not what *I* can do or cannot do, but what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

Which brings me then to another conundrum in the readings today. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." How many times have you heard those words? How many funerals have you attended that included that reading from Matthew? Come and rest. It does sound appropriate for a funeral reflection. But Jesus seems to be talking about doing more work, not ceasing from work. "Take my yoke; accept my burden." Hold on, I thought this was about resting! But no, it is not about resting, just like Paul did not mean to blame our sin on our inability to do otherwise and forget about it. The yoke, the burden that Jesus offers, which he calls light and easy, is wanting, accepting, desiring to follow him because that road leads to God which leads to salvation. This is not about throwing in the towel, this is about persevering even when we feel like there's no answer, in the life that God has given us on the cross. Which, finally is the greatest conundrum of all: where they put Jesus to death is where we find life. Amen.