

Sermon for 3 July 2011
Pentecost 3; Proper 9, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Back in the 70's, comedian Flip Wilson popularized the now ubiquitous excuse "the devil made me do it." The joke, of course, is that it's a lame excuse. "The devil made me do it" will not hold up in court or in a meeting with your supervisor at work, and I've discovered that by the time I was in high school it no longer amused my parents, much less convince them that staying out past curfew could be excused.

A certain way of reading Paul in today's epistle might, however, strike us as analogous to Wilson's excuse. "It is no longer I that do it," Paul says of his own disobedience, "but sin that dwells within me." Far from being an excuse, however, St. Paul is presenting a rather subtle account of moral and immoral action. The passage is

a bit confusing, because of the terms Paul uses: sin, law, flesh, mind. These are all terms with complex, nuanced definitions for Paul, and it will benefit us to spend a bit of time unpacking them. You will, I hope, excuse a bit of theologizing in today's sermon. The matter at hand is more than academic; it ultimately gets at how we, as Christians, are called to make moral choices so it seems worth a bit of investigation.

First, the concept of *law* is important for Paul, and we can understand why. He was a Pharisee, and it was the job of Pharisees to be well-versed in the Torah, the law of God as presented in the first five books of the bible. That is to say, Paul's whole business, his bread and butter, before he became a Christian was to know every obscure regulation from those bits of the Old Testament we hardly ever read in church. There are, in fact, 613 laws in those bits of the bible, and they cover everything from obvious moral imperatives (e.g. not

to commit murder) to tax codes and regulations on how to worship in the temple. We know a few of them by common knowledge—like the prohibition against pork and shellfish—but the particulars really get very complex, and Pharisees were concerned with regulating behavior so that all were above reproach. This often meant making rules which might strike us as overly-conscientious to avoid even the possibility of offense. This tradition is, interestingly, alive and well in Orthodox Judaism today. I recall during college, for example, opening a Jewish friend's umbrella one rainy Friday evening so that he could be certain not to violate the prohibition against building a shelter on the Sabbath.

All of this serves as background to Paul's relationship to law. He is not what in fancy theological terms we call an antinomian. That is to say, he is not content to say that God's Grace is such that it entirely exempts us from following

certain laws. The law, including those 613 obscure regulations, was given by God and is, thus, good. This means we cannot simply reject the law, even the apparently weird laws we don't follow like not eating lobster. We cannot say they were simply created by man in a benighted time who didn't really get God. The law is from God, but our relationship to it is essentially different under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. We have, in other words, a transformed relationship to the law.

Because we are human, because we are fallen, this new relationship to the law is in some sense affected by *sin*. Sin is another of those technical terms Paul uses, and it relates to the other two technical terms: *flesh* and *mind*. Sin, here, is actually the Greek word *αμαρτια*, which literally means "missing the mark". It is the word that the ancient Greeks would have used of an archer who couldn't shoot the bullseye. But in today's reading, Paul personifies sin. It is more than an occurrence

of missing the mark; it is something which dwells within us, endowing us with an almost unavoidable tendency to err. It is not that "the devil makes us do it", it is that our very nature is such that it leads us to mess up. It is this nature which Paul calls *flesh*.

We must be very careful with this term, though. It is *flesh* not *body*. For those interested in the Greek, it is σὰρξ not σῶμα. Our bodies are gifts from God, who made them perfect at Creation and who gave His son a real body not only when he was born but when he was raised from the dead. This is why John makes such a big deal of the resurrected Christ eating and drinking and being physically touched by Thomas. Such will be our state after the resurrection. As we say in the Apostles Creed "we believe in the resurrection of the body" not "in the resurrection of disembodied ghosts".

Anyway, the biblical view is that bodies are good things. It is flesh, or the tendency to sin

which is a bad thing. It is the flesh which Paul explains later in his letter to the Romans that demands the gratification of desires which have no bearing on our livelihood, inordinate desires which go well beyond the normal needs and creature-comforts by demanding that which benefits us to the detriment of others: that is, greed and lust and gluttony and pride. Ultimately, the law (all 613 regulations) was given as a means to avoid these fleshly desires.

The New Covenant is in a sense more difficult because in place of all these laws, a mere two are given to dissuade us from falling victim to the flesh: love God and love your neighbors. It is more difficult because instead of following a bunch of clear rules, we have to reckon how all the choices in our life meet or fail to meet these two commandments.

And that is where the *mind* comes in. Again, this is a technical term, and it does not mean

reason. I have found in my own life that often reason leads to sin as much as being irrational. This might sound a bit counterintuitive, so let me explain. Reason is a gift from God, just like our bodies, but like our bodies it can be taken over by what Paul calls the flesh. Whereas the needs of the body can be perverted by the flesh into inordinate desires, as I've already mentioned, human reason can be perverted by the flesh to justify just about anything. This is what we call rationalization. Herman Melville, in his novella *Billy Budd*, wrote of "conscience being but the lawyer to [our] will." How often do we knowingly do what we ought not to do after convincing ourselves that we are justified in the offense. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton goes so far as to suggest that Adam and Eve's transgression may have come after such a rationalization, and takes us through several lines in which Eve convinces herself that God really meant for her to eat the fruit.

So, reason has the potential to lead us astray just as it has the potential to lead us down the right path. So what is the "law of the mind" which Paul says does battle with the "law of the flesh". We find the answer when we look elsewhere in Paul's writings. In First Corinthians, Paul explains that discerning God's will in our lives is possible because "we have the mind of Christ." In Philippians he urges his followers to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Later in Romans, Paul says, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Doing what God demands of us is dependent on us conforming our minds to that of Our Lord.

How in heavens name are we to do that? If I knew the answer entirely, I'd be a much less selfish, struggling person than I am. I believe, however, that I know how to start. It seems to me

that we begin the process of "conforming our minds" and growing "to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ," as Paul put it to the Ephesians, through the hard work of authentic prayer. Prayer is nothing less than participating in the work of Christ which began on His sojourn in the wilderness and found its consummation in the prayer He offered on the cross for mankind's salvation. It matters less how one prays (though the prayer book offers an excellent model for daily prayer). A daily practice of thanksgiving, praise, intercession, and bible study should be central; and our weekly observance of the Holy Communion serves to bind our lives even more closely to that of our Savior. Whatever the method, though, the practice of prayer has an evident impact on how we live and militates against the assault of "the world, the flesh, and the devil" (to take a phrase from the prayerbook). We will never reach perfection, which Paul knew painfully well. "[We]

do not do what [we] want, but [we] do the very thing we hate", and this will remain a constant struggle. But "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" that in spite of the fact that sometimes we err, God's Grace is infinite and His forgiveness waits only upon our reception of the same.

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