

Why Did I Do That?

A Reflection for Morning Worship on the Star Words: *Motivation & Balance*

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, February 13, 2022

Text: Romans 7:14-20

“Why did I do that?” How many times have we each said this to ourselves as we climb into the car after an upsetting conversation with someone, a conversation when we said something we deeply regret saying as soon as the words spew out of our mouths? Or when we did something unkind to someone else just because in the moment, we felt totally justified in what we did but soon realize we had totally over-reacted? Make no mistake, mean words said or unkind actions taken happen in a split second, a knee jerk reaction to the circumstances of the moment, and what led up to the moment. And the truly awful thing about these mean and unkind actions and words is that they are directed just as easily at people we love as they are at strangers. Perhaps even more so because those loved ones are close at hand, targets for our anger and wrath for the simple reason that they are there, in harm’s way as it were. We have a nerve-rattling experience driving home and suddenly we’re snapping at whomever greets us at home. We’re angry about an experience at work or in the grocery store and suddenly the dog or cat can’t do anything right, running for cover as our anger seethes in their direction. Any of this sounding familiar?

These scenarios are exactly what the Apostle Paul is talking about in the text we read this morning from his letter to the church in Rome. As we’ve talked about previously, Paul’s letters, including this one, are one half of a conversation between Paul and the churches he founded throughout his travels in the Roman Empire. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the freedom to travel anywhere in the empire even though he was a

Jew from the conquered territory in Palestine. And travel he did, planting churches everywhere. Paul is the primary reason the church expanded as quickly as it did following Jesus' death and his letters give us important insights into how those early churches were struggling to live as the beloved communities of Christ they aspired to be. It is Paul's writings which give early form to much of what we now take for granted as baseline Christian theology. Important to note here is that Paul was also a Jew and well educated, so much of his worldview was formed in what were essentially two competing cultures. That's why it matters to understand Paul's background and context anytime we read his words to the early churches because who Paul was as a person, what he believed personally as a human being from long before he ever knew about Jesus is revealed in his writings. His thoughts on women – their heads should be covered and they should be quiet; and marriage – not a good thing at all but do it if you must – reflect these formative beliefs. Add to this is the very simple fact that Paul never met Jesus in person while Jesus was alive and it becomes clear that Paul's role as the earliest theologian of the Christian faith is both surprising and odd. But, it is what it is.

Paul is indeed a fascinating and complex figure in the early church. He never knew Jesus personally. In fact, as Saul (his name before his conversion on the road to Damascus after Jesus' death and resurrection) he was one of the leading persecutors of Jesus and his disciples. He felt they were totally undermining the foundational precept of Judaism that God's law, as in the Ten Commandments and subsequent related regulations summarized in the Torah, was paramount in all circumstances and should be the sole basis for living one's life. Jesus came along and totally upended that entire concept saying that the Law of Moses essentially boiled down to one simple

concept: we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and we are to love others as much as we love ourselves. That's it. Jesus argued that all the other rules and regulations were meaningless, especially since over time the people had come to believe that the Law was God, that following the Law as scrupulously as possible was all one needed to do to show one's love for God. I am explaining all this because Paul's background is a necessary prerequisite to understanding what is going on in this text we read this morning. This brief text is one of Paul's attempts to describe his own internal battle in negotiating the radical love of Jesus and his formation as a person of faith. This is why these words ring so true for us. Paul is sharing in these words that he struggles with his motivation behind how he acts each day. In this text we see Paul doing battle with his motivations as he also strives for some sort of balance in his life as a person trying to follow Jesus.

Now let me explain that Paul is doing some complex theologizing here. That's why as we read this text, we almost stumble over getting the words out. It's as though Paul himself was stumbling around trying to figure out what felt like two competing realities within himself. He reflects on himself the same way we all do sooner or later: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Wow, that sounds familiar. In fact, Paul's words here come dangerously close to an almost self-loathing along the lines of "why did I eat that huge slice of cake? I have to lose weight!" OR, "why did I snap at that cashier? It's not her fault I didn't have that coupon with me. I'm a horrible person."

Okay, so far we understand where Paul is at in how he's feeling. Then his incessant need for theologizing kicks in and we quickly get lost in Paul's thoughts. "Now if I do not do what I want, I agree that

the law is good.” Huh? What the heck does that mean? Well, Paul reveals his thought process in his next few sentences. Essentially, Paul is saying that the law as he understood it BJ – before Jesus – was a good thing because it clearly spelled out what was good and what was bad, what was sin and what wasn’t. Okay, that makes sense. But then he really loses us in this next sentence, “But in fact it is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells within me.” Say what now? Well, this is Paul talking about original sin. In this text Paul is essentially saying that the reason he keeps doing what he doesn’t want to do – the reason we all do this – is because of the sin that lives within us. In other words, we can’t help doing the wrong thing because sin – the propensity for doing evil – is within each one of us. We are literally born with it. It “dwells within me,” Paul says. This is why thinking about doing the right thing, the good thing is so much easier than actually doing it. And then Paul takes it one step further and this is where he loses us, “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Why does it feel like Paul is going off the rails here? We were right with him as he talks about doing what he doesn’t want. We get that. We’ve done that. A lot. But, then he says it is the sin that lives within us that is responsible for this evil we do? So, does that mean we are not responsible for what we do? That somehow, we don’t need to worry about it? But that can’t be right, can it? Yikes! Paul has seemingly painted us right into a corner. Or has he? No, not really. Paul’s argument here is laying the foundation for his understanding of why it is Jesus came and lived among us in the first place – to free us from our sin by changing how it is we as followers of Jesus understand the “law and the prophets” as Jesus referred to the rules and regulations of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus changed the under-standing of God from a judgmental figure on a distant throne to

a loving partner guiding us through life each day. Jesus said that following the laws of the Torah were meaningless, no matter how scrupulously done, if God's love was not evident in ones actions.

This is, at its most simplistic, was what Paul is trying to say here. He is saying that following Jesus is much more difficult than it would seem, that we always need to be aware of our motivations for how and why we act as we do so that we can keep Jesus in the forefront of our lives each day. But Paul is also saying that we must strive for balance in our lives as well. What do I mean by that? Well, I think we see Paul struggling with the same shortcomings we all find within ourselves. We all have the propensity to be unkind and thoughtless given the right set of circumstances. We all can and do routinely mistreat other people, react poorly in certain situations, and we can't seem to help doing it. We feel like it's almost impossible to be the kind of people we want to be – people Jesus would recognize and affirm.

Yes, this is exactly Paul is saying. We can't be who and what we want to be because our very nature as human beings prevents us from doing so. Enter Jesus, who promises us unconditional love and mercy made manifest in the forgiveness of sins, our sins. We have but to ask Jesus for forgiveness and it is granted. But, we can't leave it there. We can't do the wrong thing – whatever it might be – and then just ask for forgiveness and bop along unchanged by the experience. The simple truth is, dear ones, that if we don't want to work actively on the lifelong challenge of becoming who Jesus knows we can be, then Jesus' gift of unconditional love and forgiveness becomes meaningless. This is what the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer means when he talks about cheap grace. Cheap grace is taking the unconditional love and forgiveness offered by Jesus and leaving it there. We do wrong when we ask for forgiveness, already assured Jesus has offered it to us

unconditionally, and then we just move forward like nothing has changed, like we haven't changed – because we haven't. Cheap grace is meaningless, dear ones, because it is not transformative. It is grace reduced to a transaction, a one-off. And that was never, ever what Jesus had in mind. If we can acknowledge our sin, discern our motivations behind what we are doing, then and only then do we have a chance at coming to terms with our shortcomings at achieving some sort of balance in our lives. Then and only then do we have a chance at becoming who Jesus always believed we could be – a beloved Creation of a Loving God prepared to make a positive difference in the world. Then and only then can the balance and harmony with God and the others in our lives we seek throughout our lifetimes become real, a solid foundation on which to build our lives each day.

This is heady stuff, folks. I know that. Paul lived in his head and wrote from that space. Most of us don't do that which is why taking the time to think about Paul and his thoughts is so valuable and important to do. Paul, like us, really wanted to understand who Jesus was and why discerning what Jesus expects of us is our task throughout our lives. Paul's words share his thought processes with us and the truly amazing thing is that almost 2000 years after he put pen to paper, what he wrote still has the power to touch us so deeply right where we live. Such is the power of Scripture, when we open our minds and hearts to its possibilities.

So, the next time you climb into your car after an exchange with someone that you wish you had handled better, remember our friend Paul. He understands that part of you better than you do! Been there, done that! Then, remember what Paul figured out for all of us. We're not perfect. We screw up, all the time. Jesus knows this about us and loves us anyway and we should love ourselves too because that's the

only way we can open our minds and hearts to the transformation possible every time we screw up and realize we need to do better because Jesus knows we can. That's all Jesus wants of us. Not perfection. Not sinfulness confessed but left unchanged. That's cheap grace that doesn't really accomplish anything. We're better than that. So much better than that. Jesus knows that. Paul knew it too. So, the only question remaining is, do you? Amen.