

Pentecost 5A + July 9, 2017
Romans 7:15-25a: “The Devil Made Me Do It”

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“The Devil made me do it.” We’ve probably used that as a playful excuse at one time or another for rationalizing minor things we did against our better judgment. “I shouldn’t have had that second piece of chocolate cake, but the devil made me do it!” As far as I can tell, the phrase was coined by comedian Flip Wilson on his hugely popular comedy series back in the ‘70s. Or more accurately, it was coined by his most famous character, the glamorous and flippant Geraldine Jones. In one skit, when her preacher husband complains that the dress she’s wearing is the third she’s bought that week, she shoots back, “The Devil made me by this dress! I didn’t want to, but he kept following me and telling me how great I looked!”

Senator Al Franken, Democrat from Minnesota and former comedian on Saturday Night Live, tells a hilarious story on this subject. After he was elected a decade ago, he felt he needed to convince his colleagues that his previous career as a comedian was not a liability. So he worked hard at being serious.

At a committee hearing a year later on a proposed gay rights issue, he relates how he fought with the devil not to tell a joke that had just popped into his head. The room was full of progressives and gay rights advocates, but no Republican senators from the committee were present. As people were making their opening statements, Franken suddenly thought, “Wouldn’t it be funny if, when I was called on, I said, ‘I think it’s a shame that none of the gay members of the committee showed up today?’”

Franken immediately knew telling the joke would be a terrible idea. It would ruin all the credibility he had been working to build. At that moment, he said, the devil popped up on his left shoulder. “‘C’mon!!!” the Devil yelled. ‘Tell the joke! It’ll kill!!!’” A guardian angel then appeared on his right shoulder: “Don’t do it! You’ll regret it!” and the two carry on a vigorous argument. The angel finally wins, and Franken gave a conventional opening statement, with no one having any idea of the psychodrama that had been going on inside his head.

This is really same battle Paul is talking about in today’s reading from Romans 7. The devil is pulling us one way, and our better judgment is pulling us the other. Paul begins:

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

This is an honest assessment of the human condition. Haven’t we all beaten ourselves up for doing things we know we shouldn’t have? Not just the extra piece of cake, but harsh words we shouldn’t have spoken, or duties we neglected, or someone asking for our attention who we ignored because it wasn’t convenient--when we could have been kind, and responsible, and attentive? Paul goes on:

¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.

Here Paul is telling us of the value of the law. Think of the law as the 10 Commandments. Without the Commandments to correct our behavior, we’d just do whatever we felt like. But the law instructs us not to do those things. So the law is good. Without “do not steal,” for example, we’d take things from people at random, like a poorly behaved five-year-old I once saw at a picnic who went all around helping himself to food from other people’s plates, with no parental supervision. Paul continues:

¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Here he is recognizing where the temptation to disobey the law comes from: From the sin in which Paul knew the devil still holds us captive, the sin that is the subject of our confession at the beginning of each worship service. “We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by things we have done and by things we have left undone,” we confess each week. So we can say about these things in all seriousness, “The devil made me do it.” Paul goes on:

²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members [the flesh, as opposed to the spirit] another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

The closer we get to God, the more earnestly we follow Jesus’ call, the harder the devil works to get us into his corner. As Paul writes in 1 Peter 5, “Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”

So what hope do we have against so such a crafty and relentless enemy? ²⁴**“Wretched man that I am!”** Paul then says in agony in our Romans 7 reading. **“Who will rescue me from this body of death?”**

Only a friend—a really good friend. A friend who is always there for us.

A friend who, when the chips are down and we find ourselves behind bars, hands us a “get out jail free” card because he loves us no matter what we did or didn’t do.

A friend who stands by us in the midst of our temptations because he knows what it is to be human, to be tempted, to suffer, and to do battle with the devil.

A friend who loves us so much that he would die for us. A friend who did in fact die for us, so the chains of death would be broken and we could know the joy of living fully and loving freely, without fear, as God intends for us.

A friend who bids all who are weary to come to him with their heavy burdens, because in his arms we will find rest for our souls.

Who will rescue us? Paul's answer is clear: **"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"** What a friend we have in Jesus. AMEN.