

Proper 9A – So What if We Can't! God Can!

Romans 7:15-25a St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer 7/3/11

In the past several years we've heard a fair amount of discussion as to whether America is the sort of exceptional place contemplated in the famous suggestion in the sermon by John Winthrop that his new settlement in what has become Massachusetts should be like a city on a hill that all might watch. Though there are other nations in today's world certainly worthy of admiration, on this 4th Of July weekend it seems to me to be appropriate to note that in my opinion America really is an exceptional place. As one quick example, just look at the origins of a couple of our presidents – Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president, who was born in a log cabin and had but one year of formal education (truly a self-educated man), and our current Democratic president, the first black president and the son of an African and step-son of an Indonesian. Both families struggled at times with poverty. Can we imagine either president coming to power in almost any other nation on earth – except, perhaps, by way of a coup?

As a people we really do have a deeply ingrained, uniquely American belief that, so long as someone has enough education and drive, he or she can accomplish almost anything. The sort of expectation that tomorrow will always be a better day probably dates way back to the first days settlers came to this country -- particularly to the Massachusetts Bay Colony of John Winthrop. Our individual ability to progress, particularly through self-reliance and optimism in America's future were strong themes in much of 19th-century literature – from Emerson's various essays and speeches in the 1830s and 40s such as **The American Scholar** and **Self-Reliance** to Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis in his **Significance of the American Frontier** of 1893 that the struggles of American settlers as they moved westward produced a strong, resilient sort of person capable of forging new solutions and new institutions to deal with the problems they encountered as they reached ever newer frontiers.

At one time, as a college student in the 50's, I was much taken with these versions of what later came to be called "rugged individualism." So much so that I joined a Unitarian Church in Waltham, Massachusetts, at least in part because of that denomination's assertion at the time that we humans are almost inevitably going to progress. Surely, in many ways, of course, this thesis has been borne out. Who, for example, in the 50's could have conceived of a device that we might carry around in our pockets with which to make phone calls that would also have more computing power than the mightiest machine had during the Second World War?

But, before we get too cocky – too full of ourselves – rereading what Paul has to say in today's reading from his letter to the Christian community in Rome might help us

put into context any belief we might have in our ability to progress in the non-technological areas of life – such as being more loving, more compassionate, more Christian human beings. Eastern Orthodox theology has long emphasized the concept of theosis, or deification, a concept that flows from statements such as the one by St. Athanasius of Alexandria that God became man so that man might become God. He didn't mean that we literally could become God (or Gods), but that, in a mystical way, we can, with God's grace, become more and more Godlike until – after our death – we might be reunited with God once again.

But, much as I'd like to think that it's a piece of cake to achieve this moral and spiritual growth, I have to acknowledge once again my disillusionment because of what I came to see as the world's clear failure to live up to the perfectibility that I had believed in, and that had led me to the Unitarian Church. It's why now I am back in the Episcopal Church of my youth. Paul makes an important point in today's epistle – that the pull of the flesh, as he is wont to put it, is mighty strong.

Because it is much too easy to misunderstand what Paul means by his so frequent references to the flesh, I think it's important to point out that he is not referring to what we might ourselves call sins of the flesh. Instead he's referring to what he perceives to be the almost irresistible temptation we face as humans to think ourselves – fleshy creatures that we are – capable of getting ourselves right with God. If we are slaves to the flesh, in Paul's view that means that we believe ourselves, not God, to be in charge of our destiny. It's what I have for a long time thought of as the Christian paradox, which is that if we try to live as we believe Christ would have us live, we have to ask whether we're doing it as his disciples – or instead because we believe it will gain us God's favor?

In this passage Paul is suggesting that there is nothing actually wrong with obeying the law – whether the law of Moses or rules imposed by today's Church makes no difference I'm quite sure. In fact, elsewhere he is very clear that, as Saul of Tarsus, before his life-altering experience on the road to Damascus, when he became Paul, he was absolutely without fault in his efforts to follow the laws given in the Torah. But here's the paradox I spoke of. He – and we – are almost incapable of following the law without believing that following it will save us, that somehow we have within us the capability, by doing what God has directed us to do – by following the Judaic laws or by living as Christ would have us live – of earning God's approval.

It's sort of, in his mind, the equivalent of the American spirit we spoke of back at the beginning of our exploration of what Paul is trying to tell us in this passage. Just as the doctrine of individualism points to our being – in the words of that favorite old poem, **Invictus**, by William Ernest Henley – masters of our fate and captains of our soul, so also, Paul is saying here, a similar sort of individualism is at work, insisting that we do not need God's grace to save us from ourselves. Indeed, Paul goes even further to suggest that whether we obey the law or not, we are still going to sin if we do not rely on that grace, since our sinful nature is simply too strong to resist sin

without it. Another way of putting that is that our determination to rely on our own efforts is doomed if we fail to accept God's grace.

One can see the origin of 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous in passages like this one, since the doctrine most important in those organizations is that it is only in giving up our claim to self-sufficiency and surrendering our autonomy to God (or as AA would have it, to a higher power) that we can succeed in overcoming our addictions. And anyone who has ever fought an addiction to anything knows how perfect a description of his or her relationship to that addiction is in Paul's use of the term "slavery" in the sentence that precedes this passage, and "slave" in the one that follows it. As Harold Masback III, of the Congregational Church in New Canaan, reminds us:

In the film **A Beautiful Mind**, the brilliant but psychotic mathematician John Nash assures his psychiatrist that he will deploy his analytic skills to cure his own illness. "You can't reason your way out of this," his doctor replies, "because your mind is where the problem is in the first place."

Masback points out that it is the same issue in this passage of Paul's. The self cannot heal its relationship with God because it is the very self-centeredness of the self that is the problem. But, Paul assures us, salvation is always near to hand. For it we need only to turn to God and to the grace that he constantly holds out to us, inviting us only to accept it. We need not earn it, or even strive to reach up to God to get to that grace, for he is ever ready to reach down to give it to us. Then we can truly be Christ's own body here on earth to do the things we promised in our Baptismal vows to do – the things we promised to do "with God's help." Thanks be to God!
AMEN