

Pentecost 5 – A (2017)
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:28-30

The Bible reading from Romans today got me thinking about Evel Knievel. Some of you young folks may not recognize the name, but those of us who are older know him as a daredevil—jumping chasms or over busses, even attempting to jump the Snake River in Idaho. I suspect that none of us would have the guts to try those jumps. But maybe other jumps might be more within our reach?

Consider jumping over a creek during a nature hike—it's only a 6-foot jump, but if you make it, you don't fall in the water. Now consider a 30-foot jump over a chasm that separates two platforms, where jumping across the span guarantees one goes to heaven. An out-of-shape couch potato runs and jumps two feet off the platform and a long jumper equals the world record and makes it 29 feet. Still, they both jump short because the standard isn't *how far you can jump*, it is *can you jump far enough?*

Sometimes people will live their lives based on *far enough*, or in terms of spiritual life and salvation: how good is good enough. If Jesus sets the "far enough, the good enough" as total perfection, then it doesn't matter how good you are, how good Mother Teresa was, and how someone compares on the scale between the two of you. A good life lived will still be an imperfect one, unless Paul is wrong.

Scientists tell us that a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of 100 feet is composed of less than one glass of water. That amount of water is divided into about 60 billion tiny droplets. Yet when those minute particles settle over a city or the countryside, they have the power to blot out almost everything from human sight.

It's easy, even for people of faith, to live in a fog. It can be easy to allow a cupful of troubles to cloud our vision and dampen our spirit! We want to rise, take up our mat and walk, but we just can't picture what that new life is like—how wonderful it just might be.

Those who work in the field of addiction and recovery are very familiar with this sort of subconscious resistance. Whatever it is that addicts are trying to give up is easily named but hard to let go of. Relapse follows victory, which follows relapse. One step ahead; two steps back. Progress followed by failure followed by progress followed by failure. Along with the apostle Paul, such struggling people could well affirm: "I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I can't. I do what I don't want to—what I hate."

The simple truth is, they're not yet helpless enough to be healed—they haven't hit the bottom yet. They're not yet ready to give up their own human efforts to solve their problems. They're not ready to admit they do not have the power within them to make it on their own.

The passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans may connect with a lot of folks today, especially verse 15: "I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I can't. I do what I don't want to—what I hate." Think about how

frustrating it is for every person who has tried to quit smoking or lose weight; tried to quit swearing or not yell at the kids; tried to keep work at work and home at home—all of the things that we try to do and fail. All of these are good things, so why do we fail?

This is an age-old problem. Humanity hasn't solved it yet. Jesus' generation could not discern the right thing to do; Paul tells us he struggles to do that which is good; that struggle has not really changed for thousands of years. People today still have a hard time deciding just what is the right thing to do.

In spite of our best efforts, we mess up, and some of that messing up is because of our own continuing captivities to the power of sin in our lives. It's not okay that we mess up. But it is to be expected. Unless one has been brought to entire sanctification, unless one has been made perfect in this life, we still sin, and that hurts everyone. Even if we have become perfect in love in this life, we can and do still make mistakes of judgment, mistakes that can also cause harm we do not intend.

Paul's words to the Romans clearly name our need for a savior. Yet, in today's world, being a Christian is often defined and taught to be little more than moralism or being a good person. One can be a good person without Jesus or being part of a community of faith. In fact, it isn't hard to find people outside the church who are nicer or more generous than those inside the church.

In his words, though, Paul reminds us that none of us can be "good enough" on our own. We constantly find ourselves doing what we know we shouldn't be doing and saying what we know we shouldn't be saying. In spite of our best efforts, we can't jump over the river and fall in more often than we might like. As a former strict rule enforcer, Paul knew that following the law or moral guidelines wasn't enough. He needed God's grace and help, and so do we.

Six-year-old Brandon decided early one Saturday morning to fix his parents pancakes. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy flour canister, spilling it on the floor.

He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk and added some sugar, leaving a floury trail on the floor which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten.

Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something very good for Mom and Dad, but it was getting very bad.

He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven or on the stove and he didn't know how the stove worked! Suddenly he saw his kitten licking from the bowl of mix and reached to push her away, knocking the egg carton to the floor. Frantically he tried to clean up this monumental mess but slipped on the eggs and fell, getting his pajamas white and sticky.

And just then he saw Dad standing at the door. Big crocodile tears welled up in Brandon's eyes. All he'd wanted to do was something good, but he'd made a terrible mess. He was sure a scolding was coming, maybe even a spanking. But his father just watched him.

Then, walking through the mess, he picked up his crying son, hugged him and loved him, getting his own pajamas white and sticky in the process!

That's how God deals with us. We try to do something good in life, but it turns into a mess. Our marriage gets all sticky, or we insult a friend, or we can't stand our job, or our health goes sour.

How am I going to find God when my life is chaotic and filled with confusion? Great stories of faith being recovered and rediscovered occur when a person is in crisis. When we are in crisis, we grow weary. When we are angry at parents, or children, or boss, or anyone, there is no energy to look for God. When life is oppressive and dark clouds of sadness engulf us, we can't see God. Our soul, that sacred place where we experience God's enlivening presence, is filled and cluttered with the debris of grief, anger, and sorrow. That's a heavy load.

Sometimes we just stand there in tears because we can't think of anything else to do. That's when God picks us up and loves us and forgives us, even though some of our mess gets all over him.

Every day, in every way we can come to rely on sanctifying grace. We do not and cannot take it for granted. We can and need to find ways, not only in worship today, but day by day, to join Paul's cry and acclamation: "Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

The desire of many is the one named in another Bible passage I'd like to read from today, from Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." Many people long for a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light. Not that they are looking for baby-food Christianity which makes no demands on them and carries no expectations and does not expect us to pick up and carry our cross; people are just sometimes spirit-weary.

Such beautiful words: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."

What does it mean to feel the kind of burden Paul describes today? What might it mean for you to lay it down and take up the easy yoke?

Jesus offers:

Words of peace.

Words of rest.

Words that we turn to for comfort during times when life is hard.

Words that speak loud and clear of the need to take a step back from the tendency to overthink matters of faith.

That's why Paul's question and answer at chapter's end is both challenging and freeing at the same moment: "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (NRSV)

If you are simply tired because you didn't get enough sleep, then take a nap. But if your very soul is weary, hear this great invitation. Know that the one who invites you knows your struggles and is anxious to be your companion on your life's journey.

Jesus speaks to all who struggle to appease the god of their own creation. If your home never seems clean enough, your kids never smart enough, your appearance never adequate enough, Jesus' words speak to say: "I know you aren't perfect. I know full well every ounce of inadequacy you have felt, but it doesn't matter. I love you. I am coming to live with you, and I will lift from you the terrible burden you are carrying."

There is only one answer to life's challenges and questions. There is only one way through the challenges and trials of life. There is only one person that can guide us as we wrestle with the challenges and trials of life.

Weak and wounded sinner, lost and left to die;
O, raise your head, for Love is passin' by.
Come to Jesus, come to Jesus, come to Jesus and live!

Now your burden's lifted and carried far away,
and precious blood has washed away the stain.
So sing to Jesus, sing to Jesus, sing to Jesus and live!

Like a newborn baby, don't be afraid to crawl.
And remember when you walk, sometimes we fall.
So fall on Jesus, fall on Jesus, fall on Jesus and live!

Sometimes the way is lonely, and steep and filled with pain,
and if your sky is dark and pours the rain,
then cry to Jesus, cry to Jesus, cry to Jesus and live!

Oh, and when the love spills over, and music fills the night,
and when you can't contain your joy inside,
then dance for Jesus, dance for Jesus,
dance for Jesus and live!

And with your final heartbeat, kiss the world good bye,
then go in peace and laugh on Glory's side.
And fly to Jesus, fly to Jesus, fly to Jesus and live!

Fly to Jesus, fly to Jesus, fly to Jesus and live!