

THE SHOULDs

Sermon for Pentecost 5A (Proper 9)-Rom 7:15-25a, Mt 11:16-19, 25-30

LPC, 7/9/17

One of my frivolous Facebook friends this week posted a slideshow entitled “Why Women Live Longer than Men.” The pictures were of men doing things against better judgement. One guy was repairing an electric box while standing in a deep puddle of water. Another was welding something, sparks flying, within a few feet of some oxygen canisters. A third was painting the ceiling of a stairwell while perched on a ladder of which one end was supported only by another guy. You get the idea. While I naturally deplore the sexism inherent in such a post I must admit it was very, very funny.

But of course men are not the only ones who do things against their better judgement. At one time or another we all do. And it appears this is nothing new.

St. Paul, writing to Romans, describes perfectly the condition of doing what you know you shouldn't do, or not doing something you know you should do:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it... I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind.”

St. Paul appears to be suffering from a bad case of the shoulds. I am fairly certain most of you can identify. In my experience, the shoulds often take the form of a concept that begins, “I know I shouldn't, but...”

You can probably fill in the rest of that sentence in a way that is familiar to you. Maybe it's something like, “I know I shouldn't order that high-calorie meal, but...” or

“I know I shouldn't have another drink, but...” or

“I know I shouldn't try and put this together when I'm tired...” or

“I know I shouldn't feel angry...”

You get the idea.

Here's the trouble with shoulds. Shoulds often end up hurting us. This is ironic because the ostensible purpose of shoulds is to protect us from getting hurt. Having that high-calorie meal or that extra drink might very well be bad for us. Trying to solve problems when we're tired often ends doing more harm than good. Anger can eat us up.

The problem is that nobody can do what they should all the time. This is especially true for people with very high standards. People with high standards tend to live with a lot of shoulds.

But even people with high standards are fallible. People are finite. People have limited resources and vision, even the most talented and far-sighted of us. Sooner or later we fail. We all fail, if only because we will eventually die. Most of us are going to fail a lot before then.

Measuring our failures against our shoulds creates guilt in us. And this is where shoulds can really begin to hurt us. Shoulds create guilt and guilt kills. Guilt keeps us awake at night. Guilt thwarts relationships with other people. Guilt leads to inner neuroses and outward dysfunction. Guilt paralyzes. Guilt kills joy. No wonder St. Paul cries in despair, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

This is the primary way that shoulds and guilt hurt us. But there is another way that shoulds and guilt hurt us... a much more far-reaching way.

For many of us, dealing with the knowledge of our own fault and failure is unbearable. Because people cannot bear to contemplate their own imperfection, they tend to project blame onto other people. This is generally very easy to do because the other person is never completely blameless. Often we find that identifying the fault of the other is a very effective strategy for diverting our attention from our own faults and failures.

I believe that the widespread dysfunction in our society, our politics and our interpersonal relationships stems from how good we have gotten at projecting blame onto the identifiable other. Accepting our part in the dysfunction is uncomfortable. It's so much easier to place all the responsibility on the identifiable other.

It's all the red states' fault. It's all the blue states' fault. It's the immigrants. It's the fundamentalists. These attitudes are very effective at transferring blame and deflecting those unbearable guilty feelings. Unfortunately they are also very effective at distancing us from other people and preventing us from fulfilling God's commandment to love our neighbors, never mind our enemies. Thus do shoulds hurt us. Thus does guilt make us unfit for God's purposes. Who will rescue us from these bodies of death?

St. Paul tells us who: God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus himself tells us how, in Matthew's Gospel: by trading burdens with us. We give Jesus our burdens: our burden of shoulds and should nots, our burdens of guilt, our burden of being unable to forgive ourselves, our burdens of fallibility and finitude, our burden of displacing our own guilt into blame of others. Jesus takes all of this and trades with us.

And, as Jesus himself tells us, Jesus' burden, the one we take when we give our burdens is light. Jesus's burden is the burden of love and forgiveness. Perversely, we fight this burden exchange. We feel we should (there's that poisonous word again!) carry heavy burdens for what we have done. Giving up the burden of “should” may be the hardest thing we ever do.

I am not talking about eschewing all our responsibilities. I am talking about exchanging the burden of imperfection for a life a relationship with Jesus Christ, which is quite a commitment. But a burden exchange with Jesus means a life given to God. A life given to Jesus is a life of doing, not shoulding. To paraphrase a certain Jedi master, “Do or do not do. There is no should.” A life of shoulds is perpetual bondage, while a life given to Jesus is a life of freedom.

Let us be free, and find rest for our souls.