



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard L. Baker, Jr.
July 23, 2017 Sermon

The Divided Self and Its Healing

Psalm 130; Romans 7:15-25a

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

When Paul wrote those words almost 2000 years ago, he was talking about Brendon.

Brendon was a student of mine—a soccer player, president of his fraternity; in the old days, he would have been called a big man on campus. In the fall of his senior year, he decided he wanted to take a philosophy course, and even though it would be his first philosophy course, he wanted to jump into an intermediate level class—Ancient and Medieval Philosophy.

He was confident he could do well in the class even without the prerequisites; and he was right, except for one small problem. The class met Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings from 9-10. The one small problem was Friday.

Just in case you don't know: on many college campuses, by custom and practice, if not by the calendar, the week-end now begins on Thursday night, which has become a big party night, sometimes the big party night of the week.

It was certainly so on the campus where I taught—and remember: Brendon was president of his fraternity, which meant he was living at the fraternity house.

I was sitting at my desk early Friday afternoon, the fourth Friday of the semester, the fourth Friday Brendon had missed, and I noticed the paper being slid—very quietly, very slowly—under my door. Of course, I got up and opened the door. And there was Brendon, looking up at me, looking like he had just rolled out of bed 10 minutes ago.

“Brendon, come on in, have a seat, let's talk.”

“I'm sorry, Dr. Baker, I really am. I wanted to come to class, I really did. I like your class, I do. I even do the reading!” (Like most students Brendon seemed to think that actually doing the assigned reading was both exceptional and meritorious.)

I suppose I could have laid down the law: “Brendon, I'm going to dock you one grade for every class you miss from here on out.” But I'm not very good at laying down the law. And besides, Brendon was doing good work—on Mondays and Wednesdays. He was doing the reading, he was obviously liking the class, his comments were insightful, often funny, and always to the point. In a small class, where we read and discussed challenging texts, a student like that can add a lot.

“Brendon, I'm not going to get on your case: I like having you in class; I appreciate hearing your thoughts, and I think the other students do, too. And you seem to like the class—why don't you come?”

“I don't know, Dr. Baker, I don't know. I want to come, I really do. But sometimes I just can't do it. I know I should, I want to, but I can't. I don't know, Dr. Baker.”

“So, this would be a case of . . . weakness of the will?”

He looked at me. That hit home.

You see weakness of the will—which is what Paul is describing in Romans 7—where we know (or at least claim to know) that something is right or wrong, but are unable to act in accordance with that supposed knowledge—Paul says: “the desire to do what is right is within me but but still I cannot do it”—that's weakness of the will. And weak-

ness of the will is a central topic in ancient and medieval philosophy. In fact, we had discussed it on Wednesday, reading a dialogue, in which, famously, Socrates seems to deny even the possibility of such weakness.

My first goal then in teaching this dialogue is simply to get them to take Socrates seriously. Most of the students are ready to dismiss him out of hand. "He's crazy. Of course, there's weakness of the will; that's just part of being human; weakness of the will is us."

But that year, Brendon did the work for me: "Look guys, you can't just say that. Socrates offers an argument. You gotta answer his argument. Yeah, it seems to go against our experience, but maybe our experience is wrong—or at least maybe the way we understand our experience is wrong."

Sometimes, the better part of teaching is to sit back and let them learn from one another. But then, sometimes, you have to give them a nudge.

"OK, let's assume that Socrates isn't crazy—maybe he is, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt. He knows most people experience weakness of the will or at least think they do. Yet he offers an argument saying that it doesn't make any sense: if our knowledge really is knowledge, we will always act in accordance with it. Why would he make this kind of argument?"

"Because he wants us to think about whether we really have knowledge or just think we do—that's the whole reason he says he does philosophy. (This from Brendon.)

And sometimes weakness of the will can be an excuse—you know, "I just can't help myself"—sometimes that's really feeble." (This from another student.)

That's where we had left it on Wednesday, to be continued on Friday, but of course Brendon missed class on Friday.

The next week Aristotle. Aristotle, like Socrates, like Brendon, distinguishes between the cheap and easy claim to knowledge ("lip-born" knowledge, he calls it) and deeper, truer knowledge. And he seems to say (it's a difficult chapter) that if we have the deeper, truer knowledge, we will always act in accordance with it. But he also emphasizes the importance of habit, saying that developing the right kinds of habits is central to a good human life, and that bad habits can lead to what looks like moral weakness. We discussed that on Friday. Brendon was there—well, he came in 35 minutes late, looking like something the cat dragged in. "Our habits," Aristotle says, "shape our lives."

I knew where I wanted this to go. And I wanted Brendon to be there when we got there. Where I wanted it to go was to Book Eight of St. Augustine's Confessions.

In his Confessions, Augustine tells the story of the first thirty-three years of his life, culminating in his conversion to Christianity. It's not easy. He recounts his philosophical and theological struggles along the way, and because he's deeply versed in the learning of the ancient world, he transmutes that learning into what we call, centuries later, the medieval world-view. But that's not what I cared about. What I cared about was Augustine's oh-so-human struggle with himself. And I wanted the students—I wanted Brendon—to identify with that struggle.

When Augustine finally finds satisfactory answers to all his questions (not final answers, mind you, Augustine would continue to think about these questions his whole life, but satisfactory answers, answers that allowed him to go on, that cleared his way to Christian faith)—when he finally finds them you expect his conversion to immediately and naturally follow. Only it doesn't. Augustine is paralyzed. He wants to adopt the Christian faith, he wants to give his life to Christ. He knows that it's the right thing for him to do. Only he can't do it. He seems to suffer from . . . well, from weakness of the will. "the desire to do what is right is within me but but still I cannot do it." He's in anguish. For chapter after chapter in Book Eight, he's in more and more anguish.

Augustine's old way of life has turned to ashes in his mouth—he knows it—but all the same, it still has a hold on him. "Habits," he says, "are chains that we forge for ourselves." He wants the new life, at least the better part of him does. But another part of him is afraid of what this new life will be like, of what he will have to give up in the process.

He writes: "this was my prayer at that time: "God give me self-command, but not yet."

Or in Brendon's version: "God help me to get out of bed and get to class—but not yet."

I even snuck Brendon's name into the study question I distributed on Wednesday. Read Book 8 of the Confessions; this book culminates with Augustine's conversion to Christianity. But only after much struggle and anguish. What's holding Augustine back? He's already found answers to all his questions (review Book 7). So what's holding him back? (Think Aristotle here.) Also, Augustine speaks of having a divided self—is this the same thing as weakness of the will? (Brendon, you were the one defending Socrates' argument on this—what do you think?). What (who?) finally does bring about Augustine's conversion?

“Dude, he put your name in the study question, dude, now you gotta go to class now, dude.”

My plan was to ask Brendon to read the culminating, dramatic chapters of Book 8 aloud. I often asked students to read aloud: it helps focus all of us—and it keeps them on their toes. And Brendon was a natural reader. Whether he got that from his high-school-English-teacher mom or his southern, story-telling dad, or from both—I don't know. But he had that gift of getting inside a text and bringing it to life. And I wanted him to bring it to life that Friday morning, to bring it to our lives.

The reason I wanted the students—I wanted Brendon—to identify with Augustine in his struggles was because Paul wasn't talking about only himself when he wrote those words in Romans 7. Nor was he talking about about only Augustine or even about only Brendon. He was talking about all of us. We all struggle like this. One way or another, we all struggle like this. We are all divided against ourselves. Oh, some of us hide it in better than others—and some of us struggle more with indulgence and sloth, while others more with pride and vanity, while others struggle with still other things—but we all struggle within ourselves. We are all broken; we are all divided within ourselves.

Look, Socrates is right: our having divided selves, our being unable to command ourselves—it makes no sense. We ought not to be this way. There is no good reason for it. If we were what we ought to be, right reason and right feeling would always guide us and we would always follow their guidance.

But Paul is also right: we are not what we ought to be. the fact is that we're all divided within ourselves. Sin has its hold on us.

But Aristotle is also right: we're still responsible. We make choices and our choices result in habits and our habits shape our lives.

And so put it all together and we're like Augustine: stuck. Knowing what is right and good—at least part of us does, the better part. Desiring what right and good—at least part of us does, the better part. But unable to do it. We're at war within ourselves. I see in me another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in me. We're all like Augustine: Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

So to go back to the study question: What (or who?) finally does bring about Augustine's conversion? Well, there's at least a couple of right answers here (extra credit if you get more than one). First, a child does. From the other side of the garden wall, Augustine hears some school children (they're probably mimicking their teacher) chanting, “Take up and read; take up and read.” Second, Paul does. When Augustine hears them, he considers it a command from God. Lying nearby is a scroll containing Paul's letter to the Romans, so Augustine takes it up and reads. Third, the Holy Spirit does. God speaks to Augustine—gives him peace and hope through the first passage his passage he lights his eyes upon.

And yet, for all the drama of Augustine's conversion, and it was the turning point of his life, this need for God's grace, this need for the healing of the self, for the restoration of self-command, continues throughout his entire life. He admits as much in his Confessions in Book 9, admits to his ongoing struggles and weakness and sin, to his ongoing need for God's grace and healing even as a bishop. Every day. Such candor from a bishop scandalized some in the late ancient world.

On Friday morning, on my way into the building, I got a Mountain Dew from the vending machine, and put it at the place where Brendon sat—on Mondays and Wednesdays. I saw a couple of the students exchange looks. No Brendon. The bell rang. No Brendon. So, so . . . I stalled: I reviewed the end of Book 7. No Brendon. I gave some historical background for the early chapters of Book 8. Still, no Brendon. If prayers can be profane, then I confess that mine were—at least in vocabulary. “Get him here . . .” Finally, about 15 minutes into the class, in walked Brendon—looking, in the slang of the students, “bed-raggled.” I gave him a sideways glance, walked over to his place, popped the top of the Mountain Dew, and turned the opening towards his chair. I walked to the other side of the

room, and gave a little more set-up as he slid into his chair, took a gulp of Mountain Dew, and got out his book. "So Book 8 chapter 11, Brendon, will you read for us?"

There are moments in every human life, Frederick Buechner says, when we are beautiful. More beautiful than we have ever been before and perhaps more beautiful than we will ever be again. This was Brendon's moment. As he sat there reading, his hair tousled, the creases from his pillow still faintly visible on his cheek, his voice beginning to clear and grow stronger as he found the rhythm, the sense of Augustine's word, stopping only at the end of the chapter—another gulp of Mountain Dew—and then when I nodded to him, going right into the next—this was Brendon's moment. The class felt it. As he finished reading, there was that moment—that still, small moment—of appreciative silence. The class knew.

But as a teacher, you never know. You never know what effect—if any—you have on your students' lives. Oh, I know, I know: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." We quote that, say it to ourselves, hang the inspirational poster on the inside of our closet doors—but sometimes I think that's only to stave off despair, to keep the demons at bay. The truth is you never know: you never know what effect—if any—you have on your students' lives.

I do know a couple things, however. Thanks to Facebook, I know that Brendon is now married with two beautiful daughters. He got his first job as a soccer coach, then got his teaching certificate, and while he was teaching, got his masters degree in school administration, and so Brendon is now . . . get ready . . . a middle-school principal. Yes, Brendon is a middle-school principal. And so I also know this with absolute conviction and complete assurance: There is a God. Ancient and Medieval philosophy is replete with proofs for the existence of God, but this one tops them all: Brendon is a middle school principal; there is a God.

Only an cosmic scriptwriter with a perfect dramatic touch could have pulled this one off. Brendon spends his days dealing with the problems of children at an age when they struggle most for self-command and when the formation of good habits and the suppression of bad ones is of the utmost importance; at an age when a large number of them have a great deal of difficulty getting to class on time. I tell you: there is a God.

I tell you there is a God. We are not alone—we all have our the struggles, the same struggle in one form or another. We are all broken and divided within ourselves. We are all captive to sin and death. And yet we are not alone. There is a God.

A God who sympathizes with us our weaknesses. A God who came to our world—and still comes to our world—not to call the righteous, but to call sinners. A God who in every respect has been tested as we are, and yet was—and is—without sin. A God who proves his love for us in this way: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

A God who comes in mercy and grace to heal us, to heal our divided and broken selves, to deliver us from sin and death. A process of healing and being made whole that will continue throughout our whole lives so that we may be begin to live here and now as we ought and then to live forever with him and with one another in wholeness and in peace.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.