

PENTECOST III

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Romans 7:15

Not long after we'd moved to Jamaica Plain, some Jehovah's Witnesses came to the rectory door. Micah, my stepson, who was maybe thirteen, was brave—or innocent—enough to open the door. After some preliminary discourse, as he described the encounter later, one of the Witnesses asked, "What do you think about evil?"

Micah thought for a moment. "It's bad?" he ventured.

When I was in seminary, and for some time afterwards, I liked to think about the relationship between neurosis and sin. Were they the same? I didn't really think so, but I wasn't sure about what distinguished them. Neurosis, let's say, might be "a poor ability to adapt to one's environment, an inability to change one's life patterns, and the inability to develop a richer, more complex, more satisfying personality." (Wikipedia)

There are more grave and specific definitions and disorders associated with neurosis. But by the definition above we are all neurotic, all have neurotic patterns, we all engage in some kinds of behaviors that are self-defeating. Even the mildest neuroses limit our possibilities for the most abundant life Jesus promises.

Of course, our neurotic behavior impinges on those around us too, those who love us and work with us. To the degree that we are psychologically off course, our relationships will be askew as well.

And what about sin? What distinguishes sin from the description I've just given? One term comes from psychology and one from religion, for sure, but are they otherwise different names for the same phenomenon?

A simple, or simplistic, and rather antique and rigid definition of sin is that it is the violation of a moral rule, or the state of having committed such a violation. Not many theologians or pastors would buy that definition today, I hope. We think of sin as falling short of the mark (that's its literal meaning), as failing to be or do the best we can. Doesn't that sound a lot like neurosis, or self-destructive patterns of living? Failing to be or do our best?

So, then, does neurosis cause sin? Is sin a result of neurosis? Do we fail at doing and being our best because of patterns that may be hard-wired into us through childhood trauma or inadequate parenting? If that's what causes sin, how can we attach blame to our faulty behavior? *The devil made me do it?* The devil, in this case, being those early influences that affect us negatively and enduringly.

I used to think that perhaps the distinction lay in consciousness or awareness. We often know when we sin, when we fail to be or do our best, when we fall short of the mark through unkindness, selfishness, laziness, or whatever. And neurosis, Freud would probably say, resides in the subconscious, and is often inaccessible.

But that theory doesn't really work. We confess to sins of omission, "things left undone," and while we are sometimes aware of those omissions while they're in progress, so to speak, we mostly recognize them in retrospect. And that can be true of sins of commission as well. We may be unkind or unjust quite inadvertently.

Now, here we come to St. Paul's lament for today.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Here we read, it seems, a First Century description of neurosis. Paul doesn't understand why he can't always do what he sees and knows is good. His will cannot overcome what he calls his "flesh." Nothing good dwells in his "flesh," he says, and the evil that is in his flesh overcomes the good that is in his mind. He is driven by forces beyond his control. *The devil made me do it*, indeed.

I think we all know how this feels. We all know about destructive patterns in our own lives that prevent us from being our best selves. Paul calls those destructive patterns *sin*. By this he does not mean an internal personal evil spirit or devil. He means the fallen state in which we all live and move and have our being.

God made a perfect world, and part of God's perfection was human freedom. And so, we make mistakes, and have from time immemorial. The results of those mistakes surround us and work on us, and the result is that we are all influenced and made imperfect by forces we can't control. Our environment, physically and spiritually, is a damaged world and a damaged humanity, and the forces of that world work upon us to prevent us from being and doing the best we can be. *Evil lies close at hand*, Paul says.

But what if God's desire does not include human perfection in this lifetime? What if God's desire is, rather, for the human struggle that inspires

us to challenge and battle those evil forces? The evil forces without, and the internalization of those forces in our broken humanity, our personal and collective neuroses?

And what if God's desire, God's most passionate hope, is for us to know that we are not alone in those struggles? To know that we are not completely and ultimately responsible for the salvation of the world or even of our own souls? What if we have a constant companion and champion in our struggle, offering, not perfection, but a more abundant life?

Who will rescue me from this body of death? cries Paul. *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ!*

Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God! Alleluia!

Amen