

**Series: Lessons from the Common Lectionary**

**Today: Wrestling with God**

**Text: Romans 7:15-26**

**A Communion meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, July 3, 2011**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

A few years ago there was a billboard in downtown Chicago which got everyone's attention, as well as being the cause for some controversy. In big letters it asked: *"Are you good without God? Millions are."*

It was put up by an organization called the Chicago Coalition of Reason. According to an article about the billboard in the Chicago Tribune, the Coalition's coordinator said "the billboard aims to hearten humanists, atheists, and agnostics who might feel isolated or misunderstood in their quest for alternatives to religious worldviews."

The billboard's question begs for answer: *Can* a person, who rejects God's very existence, let alone God's authority, be good and do good things? Of course they can. They can be honest and kind, pay their taxes, and give money to the poor. There are all kinds of people who are good who choose not to be followers of Jesus Christ. So what do we say to those who ask us about what benefit we have as disciples?

Perhaps you remember the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. The Tin Man's quest was to find a heart. When he finally came face-to-face with the Wizard, the Wizard warned the Tin Man that hearts can be broken. The Tin Man replies, "But I still want one." And do you remember what the Wizard said next? "Back where I come from," he said, "there are men who do nothing all day but good deeds. They are called ... good-deed-doers. And their hearts are no bigger than yours, but they have one thing you haven't got."

God would say something similar to the "good without God" billboard people. He would say, "When Christians do good deeds properly, their hearts are no bigger than yours, but they have one thing you haven't got." What might that one thing be? Let's look at Paul reasoning in our text this morning.

At the end of the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul is wrestling with God. His wrestling states what all of us have felt at one time or another. We set out to do the right thing, and we wind up making a mess of things. What happened? The very thing we want to do we wind up not doing, and the very thing we don't want to do is exactly what we wind up doing. We want to do the right thing, and then we get off track. With every step that we take, we get ourselves deeper and deeper in trouble. For some it is the petty things of life, but there are those of us who have gone off the deep end completely and have struggled to make it back. If you happen to be one of those, you know what Paul means when he calls himself "wretched."

In our text for this morning Paul continues to explore the difference between living our lives by the grace of God versus living by the strict letter of the law. We must remember that Paul was a Pharisee. He was one who was strict in his observance of the Law of God; not just the Ten Commandments, but the over 600 interpretations of those commandments. There was very little room for God's grace in his life because it was so filled with the Law. If we are rigid law keepers, we don't know what to do when we deviate from the law. There is no grace to help us get back on the right track. Without God there is no way to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and try again.

I read a story the other day by a father who told of his six-year-old son, Brandon, who decided 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, 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 messy 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. 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. But just because we might mess up, we can't stop trying to "make pancakes" for God or for others. Sooner or later we'll get it right, and then they'll be glad we tried ... (—Author unknown.)

Can we be good without God? Of course we can, but when we mess up, how do we get back on the right track? Paul speaks for any of us who has been there, done that and has the T-shirt. *Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.* And that, my friends, is why we come to this table; to allow God to pick

us up, dust us off, and get us back to making the pancakes so that someone else will know how deeply they are loved by God.