

Proper 9, Year A, 2011
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Life is not easy. I think most of us would agree with this statement, even when things are going very well. For many, life seems to be a constant struggle, but we all have difficult times. There are events, within our control or not, that bring anxiety and stress, sadness, grief and anger – a range of negative emotions. Hopefully, these feelings are offset by the joys of living; else depression becomes our overriding reality. As Christians, we struggle to walk life's path with dignity and integrity, so that at the end of the day we can be at peace. We gain wounds in life, and we carry those wounds as a part of our character, a part of our being, our "self," because we are the sum total of all of our experiences.

Our Lord was not exempt from this struggle. The Gospels make that very plain. Life handed Jesus trials and tribulations in spades, yet in obedience to God, his Father, he took all of this, to the Cross. As his followers, we are redeemed by his sacrifice and we find unity with God, because we find forgiveness and reconciliation with our Creator.

In the gospel reading this morning, Jesus told us that his burden is easy and his yoke is light. What that means is that if we turn to him, he will lift away the pain, the grief, the sadness and the anger that are the products of human brokenness and sin. Faith opens us to his grace and that grace has a way of loosening the straps of the burden of life, easing the pain and granting us comfort as we go from day to day. Surely Saint Paul was correct when he said that in Christ Jesus, all things are possible. In Christ, we shall overcome.

But there is another point that Paul made that gives us perspective and understanding. We read this point in the Epistle reading from Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome this morning. If we examine the Gospel reading in the light of what Paul had to say, it will shed great light on why life is often difficult. While the difficulties of life are sometimes outside our control and a result of evil far beyond us, it is still true that many of the difficulties of life we bring upon ourselves.

Saint Paul was the son of wealthy and well-born Jewish parents, who were also Roman citizens. He had all that was needed to have a very successful and easy life. He had money, education, and political connections – the things that can take you to the top of the social ladder and give you great power and influence. Yet, like you and me, Paul struggled with life. But Paul realized that, for the most part, he got himself into his jams, and he knew that often the ramifications he suffered were the ramifications of his own misdoings or, in other words, his sin. That's a very important point and something of which we should all take note. Paul understood that by human nature, we are prone to sin. He wrote to the Church in Rome, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see within [me] another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law

of sin that dwells [within me]. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, [Jesus Christ will!]”

What we learn from St. Paul is that we let sin happen. We do not have to do sin. We are not born to sin. We have functional minds that can analyze a situation and functional consciences that can discern right from wrong. God gave us the freedom to choose. Satan cannot compel us. The Devil does not and cannot make us do anything. Therefore, we and we alone have responsibility for our actions. Yet, in spite of our ability to choose rightly, we know that, like Paul, we often do those baser things knowing, even as we do them, that we will pay an unwanted and perhaps heavy price. I think that guilt is proportional to the development of the conscience. The human situation is not going to change. Resolve is good, but sometimes it melts away in the heat of the urge.

There was an ancient English hymn that celebrated Adam’s and Eve’s appetite for forbidden fruit in what is an amusing, but most insightful way. The hymn thanked God that Adam and Eve ate the apple, because if they had not then there would never have been a need for Jesus, so God would not have sent him to us. But Adam did eat the apple, even if figuratively, and human kind has fallen into sin. The good news is that God’s love for us, in Christ, is so great that not even our own misdoings will ever cut off from that love, and we have the assurance, given us by Paul, that Jesus stands ready to rescue us even from ourselves, if we will but let him. So, hear again our Lord’s words of comfort. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” *Amen.*

