

May 7            We Struggle with Sin

Romans 7:21-25

Last week we celebrated the unconditional love we receive from our four-legged friends. We were reminded that their love gives us the briefest glimpse into God's love for us. Through their love we were challenged to be more loving, as God loves, towards all we meet.

Today we need to come to the realization that dog's sometimes act like, "Dogs!" We love them, we play with them, we train them. But even most "good dogs" once in a while remind us that they are still a dog. Sometimes they like to roll in smelly stuff, or perhaps tear up a favorite toy of theirs or a shoe, glove, or couch pillow. We have a couple of pictures from Paula and Aaron Barnes showing us just such times. In one of them the roll of toilet paper is just too tempting and in the other, there was a mud puddle and you know, things happen!

Now, whether or not we want to admit it, we sometimes act like a dog. What I mean is that we react to the stimulus of our environment instead of act as we know God has called us to act. We get angry and explode instead of showing unconditional love. We get busy and ignore instead of greeting people with love. The apostle Paul wrote honestly about such moments. As strong a person in faith as Paul, when examining his life, he realized that his actions didn't always match the ideals he truly held to. Like our dogs, we sometimes fall short in our struggles to live the way we want to live. In the Message, Eugene Peterson paraphrased verses 22-23 this way: "I truly delight in Gods commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge."

Can you recall times when those words describe your experience? We all have those moments when our "baser" side takes over. Let me give you just a couple of examples. Someone does or says something to you that really hurts. You react in anger, perhaps yelling at them or stomping away. You know the Christian ideal is to forgive but you are so hurt, you want to protect yourself and so your rebellious side takes over. Or you are with a group and you end up going with the flow of the evening.

Afterwards you wonder why you said something, you did or didn't say something, or acted the way you did. You know better!

In these and many other ways we are acting just like a dog. Hear this quote: "A dog can't think that much about what he's doing, he just does what feels right." Barbara Kingsolver (author)

We understand this. We might say bad dog when we are scolding and training them but we don't really mean it. We know on an intellectual level that the dog did not consciously make the decision to do something bad. We humans have that capacity! But not a dog. They, as the person quoted said, just does what feels right. There are not many filters when it comes to a dog.

Gretchen Glenny writes this about her dog Roxie. Some years ago, the Griswolds had asked if they could bring their grandson and his friend over to see the alpacas when we still had the farm. While they were out in the field with the herd, I set the table with coffee and strawberry short cake. Then I went out to invite them in for dessert. When I opened the door to the house Roxie met me with cool whip all over her muzzle!

Too often, we don't have many filters either when it comes to some of our actions. Sometimes we let our impulses take over. We do what feels good and only in hindsight do we think, "Why did I do that?" Or we see others act that way and we shake our heads. We know they are not bad people. They just reacted inappropriately to the situation or did what felt good to them, forgetting that it might have consequences for others. In theological terms, we sin!

The word sin comes from archery and means, "to miss the mark." We miss the mark as to what we know should be how we live. We miss the mark in our relationship to others. We miss the mark in putting our faith into action. God understands all of this and yet still loves us. God doesn't say "bad human!"

Now this doesn't mean that there are no consequences to our actions. We, just like our four-legged friends, sometimes need correction so we don't do it again. Think

about a few times when have you been miserable with the realization that you have fallen short of God's and your ideals? Those times when you feel guilty because you know you have hurt others' feelings, acted inappropriately, or not lived up to your highest calling. We, at some deep level also realize that we have disappointed God.

What is our response at such times? Often our first response is to jump on board the "Woulda, coulda, shoulda train!" You know that train. I wish I would have done something different. I could have stopped myself. I shouldn't have done that. But once the train has left the station you can't turn it around. We wish we could do things differently. We feel guilty, just like Aaron and Paula's dogs did in those pictures. They realize their owners are not happy with them but they were just being a dog.

Now think about what all of this says about our relationship to God? First of all, God understands that we occasionally act way too human! And in that realization, there is grace. Now remember our two dog stars? Hear what the humans in their lives said about these two: "We love our dogs and cannot imagine our life without them." We understand those feelings. Yes they did not act at their best or live up to their training at this moment but yet they are still loved. The moments of reacting does not cancel out all of the joy and love they bring.

These are such powerful words of reminder. If we can shower such grace on our four-legged friends, think about how much more God showers down grace upon us. None of us like to be reminded that we sin. Hear those words from Paul again: "it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge." This reminds us of our need for Grace.

My mom liked to tell the story of my nephew. She was watching him and his sister one time and he began to really act out. Grandma, sat him down, looked him right in the eyes and let him know she was not happy with him. He smiled at her and said, "Grandma, I think I have gone too far!" He had assumed that since he was at grandmas that all of the same rules from home didn't apply. He was assuming grace without accountability. Dietrich Bonhoeffer the German Theologian who was executed by Hitler for his part in a plan to assassinate him called this cheap grace.

Grace is a gift from God, but we can't do whatever we want expecting it to happen. God understands that we sometimes react instead of live as we know we should. We sometimes miss the mark. But God also expects that we are striving each day to do our best. No one would want an untrained or untrainable dog around. The chaos that would ensue would be too great. We put up with the occasional doggy-ness because we know and appreciate how well they do most of the time.

Do you remember how a dog acts after they have been scolded? They lower their head and won't look you in the eyes. That expression has entered our vocabulary. We call it hang dog! After the head lowering they come around for a little bit of extra love. They want you to know they are sorry. They never doubt that they are loved and forgiven. When it comes to God the theological word for being sorry is repentance. It means going in the opposite direction. We realize we were wrong and turn. It is in that awareness that we find Grace. What we receive from God we need to offer to others. When someone's emotions get the better of them and they speak or act before thinking, forgive them. Realize they were just acting like a dog. It isn't their best or highest self. Move on, see what tomorrow will bring.

Do you recall how joyous your dog was when you tell them it's okay? They rejoice that the relationship has been restored. Paul also rejoices. Following these words about how those covert parts of him have rebelled he finds forgiveness in grace. Then he gives thanks to Jesus. When was the last time you thanked God for forgiving you? Too often we are still focused on the deed, feeling the guilt. God accepts our repentance, forgives and moves on. We need to say thank you.

We all rely upon grace. We need it. We need to offer it and we need to give thanks when it happens.