

“Humble Peagles We”

“I don’t get me,” Paul tells us. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

I suspect that many of us have had feelings that come close to this. We’ve all done stupid things and then looked back and wondered how in the world we could have been so stupid.

We have hurt that person we would have said we had absolutely no desire to hurt at all — but something we said, something we did, brought about that hurt. We’ve all messed up in some way or another — out of ignorance, or stupidity, or willful desire, or anger, or just dumb bad luck.

You thought we could make it to the next gas station as you sailed past the one that was 20¢ more expensive than the last one you had passed, and you were sure that the next one had to be cheaper than that — and then you ran out of gas.

You didn’t look closely at the ad, ordered the article through the internet, discovered on arrival that what you thought was a case for a really good price was actually turned out to be a single item at ten times the price you could have gotten elsewhere.

You left your pen in the brand new shirt that now is wonderfully bespeckled as it came out of the dryer.

But Paul is not talking about the kinds of stupid mistakes to which we could all confess. He is talking about the willful disobedience to what we have clearly understood to be God’s will for us. He is addressing that ongoing resistance to agree with what you know is God’s calling on your life. He is looking at this incessant tug-of-war that goes on between our baptized sainthood and our all-too-lively sinner within.

Luther had put forth the argument that we humans are *simul justus et peccator* — at the same time justified and sinners. It is one of many

dialectics is Luther's theology — his way of helping to explain the paradoxes that come as part of our faith and relationship with God: Law and Gospel . . . Bread & Wine and Body & Blood . . . Sin and Grace . . . Coram Dei and Coram Mundi . . . dozens more are scattered through Luther's thoughts.

But this one — this *simul justus et peccator* — seems to stand out; and it's because we don't want it to be true, even if we know deep down inside it really is. What we fear is the *peccator* side of the equation: we are loathe to admit we are sinners.

Oh, in the broadest sense, we will own up to it; but we constantly look for ways to mollify how sinful we really are: We're not as bad as "him," or "her," or the ever-popular "them." Our sins don't really come up to the level of "sin" — ours are more like peccadilloes, foibles, missteps, lapses. Our sins usually are things that maybe hurt ourselves, but not others. All of which is false, and all of which is beside the point! We think we can grade sin on a scale? No way.

Let's at least get to the level of St. Paul. "***I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.***" He is speaking of "law" here almost in the sense that we use it in science. "*It's almost as if, when the law tells me 'No!' my mind goes to 'Let's see!'" "I don't want to; but I do want to know what it might like if I did."* We see this acted out in two- and three-year-olds: "*Don't touch that!*" becomes an invitation not only to touch but to grab, fondle, paw, and, of course, break.

Now, not all of us are caught up in the attraction to the same things. Some people have absolutely no interest in gambling; others are absolutely drawn into it. Sex is a powerful force within us; not all succumb to the temptation of an extramarital affair. Money is of great interest to almost all people; few find embezzlement to be a good idea. But there is always some chink, some flaw, some weakness that Satan wants to and will discover and utilize to lead us astray. And it happens so often with such subtlety that we are barely aware we have crossed the line.

My friend and colleague, Dr. Terry Wardle, tells the story of the pig. He is a pig who has pig friends, eats pig food, wallows in pig mud, does just about everything you expect from a pig. But one day, God changes him into an eagle: he now soars in the heavens, swirls among the clouds, enjoys his eagle freedom. But after some time he passes over his old pig sty and decides to drop in for a visit. Before very long he is once again eating pig food, wallowing with pig friends in pig mud, acting in a very piggish manner.

The question becomes: What is he? A pig or an eagle? He's an eagle! How so? God made him to be an eagle; that's what he is. He may be a very foolish, immature eagle, an eagle who has a lot to learn about how eagles are to live and behave, an eagle who in that sty is doing all kinds of things that eagles do not do — but he is an eagle.

Terry goes on to argue that many Christians think there is such a beast as a “peagle” and he argues that there is no such thing. “Peagle” sounds to my ears a lot like *simul justus et peccator*, and Terry and I have discussed this at some length. Terry, I have discovered, is talking about identity: who are you really At your core, which are you — eagle or pig? We would have to say “eagle” — if that is what Christ has made us, that is most assuredly who we are.

Which is, I think, where St. Paul begins: repeatedly (more than 70 times) Paul uses the phrase *εν Χριστω* (en Christo).” We are “in Christ” — it is how he defines what it means to be a Christian. This is our identity: We are eagles, Jesus says so.

But then Paul's question raised today comes into the picture: “*If eagle is what I am, why do I do so much pig stuff?*” “Pig” may not be what I am; but . . . if it walks like a pig, acts like a pig, sounds like a pig, smells like a pig, looks like a pig . . . it's an eagle!?! “Peagle” is sounding more and more the apt description. It is not my identity; but it is my behavior.

The question then becomes: To which does Christ give attention? Is Christ more interested in my behavior or my identity? That is an unfair

question, because the truth is that Christ is interested in and pays attention to both. But while Christ may recognize that our behaviors often (almost always?) lead us into self-injury, broken relationships, lost dreams, and disruptions on many scales, they do not establish who we are *in Him*. No matter what you do, you belong to Christ. That's who you are; nothing you do can alter that. Let me rephrase that: Nothing you do can alter the love with which Christ and the Father embrace you — but piggyness has consequences, one of which can be that you can turn your back on your eagle identity. You forget who you are, whose you are, what you are. The very fact that Paul struggles with this tells us that he is not at that point; I suspect neither are you.

Today we hear Jesus' invitation: ***“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.”*** We need to unpack that more than a bit.

“Come to me” is an plural imperative: not just *“y'all come”* but *“all y'all come”* — but it is not the imperative that demands that we jump and on the way up ask how high; it is an invitational imperative. Who is invited to come? — those growing weary (not already wiped out) and those who are being heavily burdened. Part of the invitation is to recognize that you can't wait until you have exhausted all your own resources; when you first feel yourself growing weary, that's the time to come.

Then also: what's “heavy”? That depends. The last time I was at the grocery store, I reached over the shopping cart and across a stretch of the checkout counter to grab a bag of groceries, not realizing that it contained two half-gallon containers of lemonade; I felt my muscle twitch as soon as I tried to pick it up. What is considered “heavy” depends in large measure on a) what you are already carrying; b) what you are accustomed and/or trained to lift and carry; and c) how you go about trying to carry whatever it is.

I recall when Kristine and I moved out of our apartment in St. Louis. One of the movers was a man about five foot-four inches, and I can still see him take the refrigerator (the one that months before Kristine and I could not get up the stairs into that apartment), strap it to his back and by himself trot it down the stairs and into the van. Your “heavy” might be my “no problem” and verse vica.

So we need to hear this invitation as “*Come, no matter how little or much you feel the need. In fact, don’t wait until you feel any need; just come.*” Why? Because “***I will give you rest.***” The word αναπαυσω (anapauso) means “*to return to rest; to rest again.*” Jesus is telling us that all too often we get so caught up in our everyday that we don’t set aside the time to refresh, renew, rewire, restore — He wants to give that to us, when we come to Him.

How does this work? “***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.***” First, Jesus bids us take the yoke He identifies as “my yoke.” We are not to see Jesus removing that yoke from His shoulders onto yours; then it would be no longer His. What we are to envision is that we are being yoked to Christ; we become the team.

But we are the newcomer on the team, so we need to pay attention to what He is doing and follow His lead (Hint: He has already told us that He does what He sees the Father doing). First, we learn from Him what it means to be πραυς (praus) “gentle.” This word speaks to right relationships; not seeing yourself as more than you are. We often meld into these roles with others where we cannot accept the other for what she or he brings to the relationship but only how we can use what we need to get from him or her.

Then we learn from Him what it means to be ταπεινος τη καρδια (tapeinos te kardia) “humble of heart” — ταπεινος means to know precisely who and what you are. Do you think Jesus knew who He was? What He was about?

At it cannot be a front, a mask; it has to be at the heart of who you are. The heart, as one word-study says it, is “‘*the affective center of our being*’ and *the capacity of moral preference... [the] ‘desire-producer that makes us tick*’ ... i.e our ‘*desire-decisions*’ that establish who we really are.” Yoked to Christ and learning from Him, He promises we will find the rest we need — it is rest for our souls — ψυχε (psyche) in Greek and *nephesh* in Hebrew mean essentially the same thing: everything that it means to be you.

Which brings us back to our problem with both identity and behavior: sin has inserted its tentacles into every aspect of what it means to be human. God created us with a free will; but now sin has yoked us with this burden of not knowing how to use that will in God-pleasing ways. Luther called it “*the bondage of the will*” — *semper peccator* (ever a sinner)

Our behaviors reflect that; but we will never be to Christ anything but *semper justus* (ever justified), which leaves us as very humble peagles ... We know to whom we belong and, joined to Christ, whose and what we are. We keep learning how to follow Him, do what He did, live as He lived. We keep messing it up, because we are not yet mature eagles.

So, humble peagles we, we press on in the hope that we will fully realize all that He has promised us, and that we will know Him as He knows us and love Him as we have been loved.

Amen.