

I sometimes like to do those number puzzles call Suduko. If you don't know the puzzle, it is a grid usually 9 squares by 9 squares. Some of the boxes are filled in. Your job is to place numbers in such a way as all vertical and horizontal lines have all the numbers from 1 to 9. Some I can do quickly. But others, I just stare at, hoping I guess that I will see numbers appear mystically. They don't.

Have you ever gotten to a point in something you're doing that you just stop and stare at it, unable to find even the first clue? I sure did this weekend. I have stared at the readings for today for hours it seems. I have looked in every reference book I have. I even went back to see if I ever preached on these readings before, and I never have so you don't get a repeat, at least not this week.

I just couldn't get my hands around it. For one thing, they are both difficult in a literary sense. We don't speak like that anymore. They're full of analogies that I don't quite get. One of my pet peeves, and I have a few, is when I ask someone a question and I get a long treatise explaining how the person came to the answer and only a long paragraph or small book later do they come to the answer. You ask them what time it is and they build you a watch.

Paul is like that. Why say something in 5 words when you can use 45 instead.

But there is another reason I stared at the text. Once you get through the literary problems, these are not easy things to read. They are not pleasant. Romans talks about dieing and death. The Gospel speaks of being killed or thrown into hell, interfamily fighting and loving your parents less than loving Jesus. Tough stuff.

I had a professor in seminary that said that sometimes you just needed to preach on the meaning of the stained glass windows. I am sorely tempted. But, you expect more and you deserve more. And the scripture itself deserves more.

Sometimes scripture is hard to understand and sometimes it says things we don't want to hear. If scripture is to be meaningful to our lives, it needs to be taken seriously. That means, for me, struggling with hard texts. Not reflexively accepting them with out any critical thought, or ignoring them because they are not relevant or affirming. We have to struggle with difficult texts. Be challenged. Challenge them. Peter says to read, mark and inwardly digest scripture.

That to me is the basic problem facing the church today. I don't think either the very conservative or very liberal folk are taking the bible seriously. They are either unwilling to look critically at the text, or choose to ignore the bits they don't like.

But that's another sermon.

As I wrote this, I just realized that I've been doing what I said is a pet peeve. You want to know what the scripture means and I'm building you a watch telling you how I got to the answer I have so far avoided giving you. Bad Bob, no donut.

Just one more watch building instruction. There is a translation of the bible called the Message. Most translations take each word and translate what that word means. The Message takes entire paragraphs and translates them into current phraseology. It's not a version I would use as a primary source, but sometimes it kick starts the process. So, I recommend it as a starting point in to deeper study.

In Romans, let's look at the imagery of baptism. Now, we pour water on the baptized persons head, but in some places still, the person goes under the water and is then brought back up. Like dieing and being resurrected. The author of the Message suggests that that is what dieing in Christ means. We kill off the old self that focused on sin and we are reborn, stripped of the old ways and able to live a grace filled life.

There has been an argument in the broader church for centuries. It asks, "if you are baptized can you sin? If you sin, does that mean your baptism didn't take." One group of Christian churches has argued that one must be re-baptized if you fall into sin. We believe that we are baptized once forever. The Baptismal covenant asks if when we fall into sin, will we repent and return to the Lord.

Yeah, we can sin again, and we do. That doesn't mean the sacrament failed, it means we have failed and by we I don't just mean the sinner in question. We all say in the baptism service that we will uphold the newly baptized in their walk with Christ. If someone sins, we have all fallen down on the job. Their sin compounds ours.

Paul spoke often of the Church as a living Body and that if one part of the body sins, it brings sin onto the whole body. What we do matters. So, sinning is not compatible with being a baptized Christian. It doesn't invalidate your admittance into the Body of Christ. Another part of Romans tells us that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But sin, living outside the will of God, is not how God wants us to live. So we are to turn away from those things that form obstacles to our relationship with God and live to the best of our ability in the image of Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel is full of good news and some real challenges. I'd like to read a part of that chapter from "the Message", "Don't think I've come to make life cozy. I've come to cut - make a sharp knife-cut between son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law - cut through these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God. Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies. If you prefer father or mother over me, you don't deserve me. If you prefer son or daughter over me, you don't deserve me. If you don't go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you don't deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you'll find both yourself and me."

I don't know if that's exactly right, but for me, this time, it is helpful. See, it's not just the things we call sinful, promiscuity, faithlessness, dishonesty and the like, that keep us from loving God. Even our own family relationships can keep us from God. The history of the martyrs of the early church witness to this well. There are several young women considered saints because they chose death over marrying a pagan and denying Christ in a father arranged marriage. I don't recommend that, just as I don't recommend arranged marriages.

There was a well publicized divorce recently where according to the media, the wife left because the husband would not tolerate her newly found Christian faith. I know of people in Africa that have been disowned by their families for becoming Christians. It is still illegal in many parts of the world for rejecting the state religion and becoming Christian. But it's worth it to these modern day living and dead martyrs.

It's worth it because God loves us beyond measure. He wants us to be reunited to him through Christ. Again from "the Message", "What's the price of a pet canary? Some loose

change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail - even numbering the hairs on your head!”

It is that love, that assurance of incredible value that draws us into relationship with God in Christ. It is the recognition of that love that reminds us of our failures and that same love that forgives those failures and welcomes us home. The collect for the day sums it up, “O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness.”

In baptism, we die to the realm of sin and death, and are reborn into the land of grace and mercy. We can certainly choose to move back into old ways, and we might find it difficult to live into the baptized life. God knows that, and loves us so much that there is nothing we can do, or nowhere we might hide that can keep God from loving us.