

"What It Means To Be Saved"
Studies in Romans
Lesson Two: "Salvation and Self-Help"
Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
July 3, 2011
Text: Romans 7:15-25a
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Within the last few decades, the idea of self-help has become extremely popular and lucrative. In 2006 alone, research firm Marketdata estimated the "self-improvement" market in this country as worth more than nine billion dollars—including infomercials, mail-order catalogs, holistic institutes, books, audio cassettes or compact discs, motivational speaker seminars, the personal coaching market, and weight-loss or stress-management programs. A lot of people feel they need self-help guidance, and there is no shortage of those individuals and companies who are more than happy to meet that need and rake in the profits.

I, for one, think there is a genuinely positive side to the idea of self-help. The person who is interested in this path toward personal betterment is doing two good things at the same time: admitting the need for help and being willing to take responsibility for it (thus the "self" part of the term). In my mind, pursuing self-help of one kind or another certainly is better than the often taken alternative of

choosing to be a victim and taking no personal responsibility whatsoever.

In this regard, one of my favorite stories from the Gospels is when Jesus goes to the pool of Bethesda, described in John 5:1-18. The gist of the story is this: an invalid has been coming to this pool for thirty-eight years in the hopes of being healed. Jesus approaches the man and first asks him if he wants to get well. It's a legitimate question, since the man has been doing the same thing in the same way for thirty-eight years without results. If he really wants to get healed, you would think he would be willing to try something else. To not do so is the very definition of insanity.

In response to the question, the man responds with his practiced litany of excuses, justifying and rationalizing his actions by blaming it on the fact that he has no one to take him down to the pool when the water is stirred, when it is believed that an angel ripples the water in order for healing to take place. Supposedly, the first one to the water after such a stirring is the one who will be made well and whole. If Jesus were Dr. Phil, he would ask the man, "And how is that working for you?"

Jesus doesn't buy into the man's justification and rationalization. Christ never does. Instead he tells him to "Get up, take your bedroll, and start walking." The man is healed on the spot when he obeys the

Lord. This is appropriate self-help. Jesus is saying the same thing to us: "I will help you to help yourself, but you have to take the first step. I am not going to do that for you." That is why the most appropriate prayer in any set of circumstances is to pray as if everything depends on God and then work as if everything depends on us. There is room in our theology for self-help.

I think that we can see evidence of self-help in what Paul is saying in this passage of Romans. At least one commentator has suggested that what Paul states here is what we might expect to hear at the beginning of a Twelve Step meeting. "Hello, my name is Paul, and I am a sinner." He takes responsibility for his actions. He tries to do what is good; he tries as hard as he can. He wants to obey the law; he wants to be obedient to God; he wants to be good and do what is right. But he can't, and it's not for lack of trying.

Something else is at work, keeping him from doing what he wants so desperately to do. There is a huge obstacle in his way, so big that try as he might, the apostle simply can't overcome it. And what is that obstacle? Sin. Sin. The obstacle, the barrier, the stumbling block, the barricade is sin. So Paul follows the first step in a Twelve Step program and admits that he is powerless with respect to his condition. He is a sinner, and there is nothing he can do to conquer it all by himself.

It has been said that we in the mainline church don't talk as much as we should about sin. That's probably true. I accept and agree with that assessment. The truth is that we, even in the United Methodist Church, know what sin is; what we often fail to recognize is the magnitude of its power over us and our world. We understand the nature of sin, but we don't take it as seriously as we should, because we don't see how much control it has over us. Paul does; we don't. And we need to learn from him.

Paul understands that sin is so powerfully pervasive that it has infected everything in our world. Nothing is sinless. Paul says that "evil lies close at hand," and it does. It is never more than arm's length from us—no matter who we are, where we are, or what we are doing. Evil and the lure of sin are right there with us every step of the way. Therefore, no matter how much we may want to do the right thing, we can't always do it. Try as we might, we can't be good all of the time. We may work at it with all our mind, heart, and spirit, but we simply can't avoid the temptation to do less than or other than what God would have us do.

All this is to say that self-help is important. It is far better to take responsibility for our actions than to play the victim and maintain that we simply can't help what we do to the extent that we don't even try to do better. God expects us to try and try our hardest. Certainly

Paul did. But *self-help is not the path to salvation*. We can't save ourselves. The power of sin is simply too great. We have no choice but to rely on God. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. If we could save ourselves strictly by our own efforts, we wouldn't need for Christ to have suffered and died for us.

The reason we take communion as often as we do in our church is to remind ourselves how much we need God's grace. It helps us to understand that we can't save ourselves; we need his leadership and guidance. We need him to help us make wise choices; we need him to show us how to act responsibly and appropriately; we need him to assist us in our efforts to keep from sinning. We understand that because of sin, the things we know we ought to do, we can't seem to do, and the things we know we shouldn't do, we can't seem to keep from doing. We desperately need a constant ingestion or infusion of God's grace, and that is what the communion table reminds us of.

So as we come to the table this morning, the day before Independence Day, let us allow this sacrament to remind us that *as independent as we are, we cannot lose our dependence on God*. We cannot do good apart from him; we cannot have authentic life apart from him; and we cannot show the world the true nature and character of God apart from him. We are "one nation under God." If we will take seriously what it means to be "under God," to surrender to his reign

and rule, to be led and guided by him, to allow him to help us to be truly good—our nation will continue to prosper. My prayer is that *we* will so that *it* will.