

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Operating Systems

Romans 7:15-25a

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9) Analysis by Jerome Burce

15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

DIAGNOSIS: Old Junk

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Confounding Data*

Clarisse Convert's glow is gone. A boil of disgust swells somewhere inside. "They're all phonies," says she, now six months situated in post-baptismal life (Rom. 6:1-14) at St. Paul

Lutheran. By “all” she suddenly includes Pastor Paul himself, hitherto godlike, but only last week exposed-precisely how is beside the point-as, among too much else, another jerky male who pads his ego at the expense of others, especially women (1 Cor. 14:35b-38; certain readings thereof). “He talks the talk,” she mutters darkly. “The walk? Forget it! The good I yearned for when I started coming here he of all people simply doesn’t do (v. 19). Sure, he natters ever so nicely about not letting sin exercise dominion in one’s mortal body (Rom. 6:12). He rails against hypocrites (Rom. 2:21-23). Meanwhile his nickname with the rest of them-not for nothing, I dare say-is Old Thorny. And they’re surprised I’m dropping out? They’ve never heard of truth in advertising, maybe? Against such as this guy-the others too, for that matter-there oughta be a law!”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Conflicting Systems*

“You want law?” asks Pr. Paul when at last he sniffs the wind and goes calling on Clarisse. “Try laws, plural. Isn’t that what we’re stuck with? Not one but many systems that describe and govern real behavior in the real world? Start with The Law (v. 16), that is, ‘the law of God’ (v. 22), the one that makes me sing like the Psalm 1 songster because it describes so well the way God’s good world rightly works. Compelling that song is “the law of my mind” (v. 23)-a sound mind, dare I add, rightly addicted to solid laws of beauty and logic, doubtless the very things that help Gentiles “get” The Law before they’ve even heard it (Rom. 2:14). Ah, but then along comes another law, a contrary system, one that requires evil to shove an oar in the moment I get excited about doing good (v. 21). To this we add a law “in my members,” lackey of “the law of sin that dwells in my members” and implacable foe of the law of my mind (v. 23). In a computer it’s enough to crash a hard drive. In a human being it makes Adam Old (Rom. 5:12-14). And this, dear Clarisse, is

simply how I work-not that I like it. It's how you work too."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Meltdown

"Speak for yourself," Clarisse snaps. "Gimme a break while you're at it. Do you honestly expect that I'll excuse your hypocrisy because "you just can't help it"? Puh-leese!" "Wouldn't dream of it," says Pr. Paul. "I take you far too seriously. Truth is, you spoke for God just now, though I'll bet you didn't know it. You strangely did the same three weeks ago when you quit coming to church. You tell me clearly and vividly that I do not and cannot please you. You echo God, who said it first (Rom. 3:10-18). If I miss God's voice in your voice, call me stupid. Ditto if I fail to smell God's disdain in your disdain. Double ditto if I fail to spot God's wrath in that mess of laws I'm caught in-that tangle of operating systems, eating me alive, to which God "gave [me] up" (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). Triple ditto if I see nothing more than your own feckless pique in that decision-you've made it, haven't you-to consign me and the rest of the St. Paul's crowd to your dead-and-buried past. You're junking us, aren't you, on account of our impossible contradictions. Isn't that decision really a harbinger of God's big decision to do the same? Why else do we buy burial plots-not just me, but you too, dearest Clarisse? Your word for me these days is "Wretch." So I am. So are you. Wretched like a pre-Pentium computer on Windows 2000 software. Unless...

PROGNOSIS: A New Marvel

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Re-Design

...unless there be someone to deliver us both from "this body of death-thanks be to God!" "I take it," Clarisse chimes in, "that you're about to re-lay this Jesus stuff on me?" "What else?" says Pr. Paul. "Though more to the point, who else? Who but the one that God himself keeps laying on us both, you and me, as his sole sufficient reason for a gift of life beyond the junkyard?

Remember what I told you a while back? How God, unlike the U.S. Marines in their endless search for a few good men, has long since settled happily for one good man (Rom. 5:18 , etc.)? How good a man, you ask? So good that he actually did the good I want to do but don't, and actually refrained from the evil I loathe yet wallow in anyway. So good that he actually beat the laws of sin-in-the-members and of lurking evil. So good that he actually fulfilled "the just requirements" (Rom. 8:4) of God's "good law," doing so all the way to that horrible death he didn't deserve. How good is he? So good that God in his gracious exuberance merrily cooks up a brand new system of operating with us by which he calls the rest of us good-righteous, if you prefer-exclusively on Christ's account, if only we'll trust this (Rom. 4:24-25). Which means that God who rescued Jesus from the junkyard we sinners madly dumped him in has his mind made up to do the same for all of us when our junking day arrives-again, if only we'll trust this.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – New System Over-rides

"Do you sense the marvel of this?" Pr. Paul rolls on. "Clarisse, where God is finally concerned the old operating systems we've all been living and dying by are themselves dead and buried. The death of Jesus killed them. In their place he gives baptized types like you and me some new systems to run on. Call them new "laws" if you like, so long as you remember what we mean by law-not do's and don't, but descriptions of how things really work with real people who really live together in Christ. Take the "law of faith" (Rom. 3:27), by which is meant the habit of thinking and, in particular, of estimating through Christ the way God now does. To that add the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2) by which you and I, emulating God, treat each other-and ourselves-on the strength not of what we presently are, but rather of what God at last will make us to

be, for Jesus' sake. Imagine: with "laws" like these in place I don't have to be dismayed by the hypocritical, dying mess the former laws keep reducing me to (Rom. 8:1). I even get to invite you, Clarisse, to let Christ be your excuse for dropping the junkyard plans and regarding me still as brother and pastor, as perfection-in-the-making. Vice versa, of course, in my regard for you. That's how things work in Jesus.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Confirming Data

Does Clarisse thus invited get her glow back? At this point, who can say? It really does depend on faith, as Pr. Paul observes (Rom. 4:16a). As he'll also say some Sundays from now, faith in Jesus and all that attends it comes from what is heard (Rom. 10:17). But let's suppose that Clarisse, having heard this much, gets it. Suddenly the only phoniness that demands junking is her own, the one by which she had thought to call Christ Lord while refusing to measure fellow saints by Christ's consistent goodness for them. So back she goes to St. Paul's one Sunday, glad for the chance to catch up with Jesus as he cheerfully consorts with sinners he died for. Can we guess that she'll encounter there a face or two glowing with joy in Christ at the sheer pleasure of seeing her again? Can we guess further that extended hearing in their saintly company will get her glowing as they do? Why not? After all, when the systems of faith and Spirit kick in, that's how baptized people really do work. Which is to say-Lutheran tongue in cheek-that for such as these there is a law. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (v. 25)!