

Have you ever had this struggle? You know you need to do something, but you can't make yourself do it? OR you decide to change an unhealthy habit, but no matter how hard you try, you can't seem to break it. And sometimes, you actually do the opposite of what you intend to do. For example, someone may want to cut down on sugar in their diet, and they not only have a hard time doing this, but one night they eat an entire bag of Oreo cookies. On a deeper level, someone may really want to follow God's path, but instead they chose the paths in life that lead them away from God. These kind of struggles describe the human condition.

In today's second lesson from Romans, Paul eloquently describes his own struggle:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. That's a mouthful! Even reading this passage is a struggle!

We human beings are prone to inner conflict: Wanting to do something in our mind, but not being able to follow through with our body and our actions. Anyone who struggles with addictions of any kind figures out eventually that they can't solve this conflict on their own. They realize that they need help, God's help and the help of others.

And even if you don't struggle with an addiction, that is the conclusion that we all eventually arrive at as well: We can't get out of this struggle by ourselves: We need to go to God for help.

Another problem that goes with feeling that we can't make ourselves do what we want to do is Shame. Shame is the feeling of not being good enough, not measuring up. A feeling that you not only have done something bad, but that you are a bad person.

We hear Paul express his shame over not being able to do what he wants to do, but doing the thing he hates instead, when he says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Paul realizes that the only way out of his very human struggle is to reach out to Jesus Christ and accept his grace and mercy.

Two of today's lessons give us God's response to Paul's struggle and to ours.

Our psalm gives us solace when we are caught up in our shame. It says, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down."

These are pretty powerful words when you are beating yourself up for something you know you should have done or changed but can't seem to do it. Sometimes when we can't give ourselves a break, the only place we can't get relief is from God's grace and forgiveness, but the key is, we not only have to know that it's there, we have to accept it and take it in.

One of the things that keep us from accepting God's grace and God's direction in our lives is our own expectations of how things "Should be". In today's gospel lesson, Jesus laments that the people's judgments and expectations of him have gotten in the way of them receiving him and the gifts he has to offer them.

It is the same for us today. If we have certain expectations that we should be able to do everything on our own, for instance. Or that we "should" be able to change something in our lives when we can't, or that God should be responding to our prayers in a certain way, once again, we get stuck in a quagmire.

Robin and I got stuck in this quagmire about a month ago, when our expectations that he would get a call to ministry in the Denver area this summer didn't materialize. We were so set on how we thought things should turn out and we couldn't make it be any different than it was.

We were powerless and we were fighting with reality. We were mad at the situation and with God and with the Methodist church and sometimes with each other. Finally, we just surrendered. We thought, "this is not working the way we are responding to this situation. We need to let go of all of expectations and put our trust back in God." And so we did.

Jesus final words in today's gospel lesson have been very comforting to us and I think they are comforting to us all: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus speaks to us all who are carrying heavy burdens of shame, guilt, grief, resentment, worry, fear or whatever it is that you are carrying. He invites us to come to him with our burdens and lay them at his feet so that he can carry them with us; so that he can walk with us through our struggles and give us rest.

Most of you know that my dad was an artist. He had many struggles in his life. He grew up poor, both of his marriages ended in divorce and he struggled with anger and with his faith, but in his later years he had a conversion experience and began to know Jesus in a personal way. His transformation was reflected in his artwork as he began to paint portraits of Jesus.

My favorite painting of his hangs on the wall of my living room. It's a painting of Jesus the Good Shepherd at twilight carrying a sheep that has lost it's way. In the background is a picture of Jesus' smiling face. The title of this painting is "Caring".

When you feel lost, when you want to do what is right and follow God's path, but, no matter how hard you try, you can't seem to do it; when you are caught up in your shame or guilt, remember this image. Remember Jesus' invitation to come to him when you are weary and heavy laden. Jesus not only wants to carry your heavy burdens, he wants to carry you as a shepherd carries his lost sheep back home.