



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost 7/5/20

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment Christ Church, Needham, MA

*On July 4<sup>th</sup>: Our Original Sin & the Way Forward*

**Oh Lord, take our minds and think through them, take our mouths and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.**

How many of you remember the Flip Wilson show from the early 1970s? Do you remember the character of Geraldine, the hip, with-it woman who was always getting into trouble? Whose boyfriend's name was Killer? Do you remember what she always said when she did something naughty? "The Devil made me do it."

A little humor about the Devil may be a way into this passage, where Paul wails from the depths of his soul about the difficulty he has in doing the right thing.

Paul doesn't here use the language of a personal Devil to illustrate his struggle with sin, but he comes close. Paul captures this epic struggle within him by using the word "war" to characterize what goes on inside each one of us as we try to do the right thing; or try to avoid doing the wrong thing.

So often we see exactly what "that thing" is. To use a mundane, but regular, example in my life: just the other day I was in a tense conversation with a family member, and I could see the words that I didn't want to say forming in my mind. And I watched them travel from my brain to my mouth, and then I watched in horror as they emerged from my lips. Needless to say, the consequences were not pretty.

Paul calls this tendency to choose wrongly "sin." It is a difficult word in our culture and in our church. People often hesitate to use it. Our hesitance to use it doesn't make what it describes any less real, however.



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost 7/5/20

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment Christ Church, Needham, MA

*On July 4<sup>th</sup>: Our Original Sin & the Way Forward*

It is the tendency that human beings have to choose wrongly, to break relationships with ourselves, with one another and with God. The word itself literally means “to miss the mark,” as in shooting an arrow. Sometimes we hit the bulls-eye, sometimes we don’t. The question is whether or not we are actually choosing to try to hit the target.

We have no idea what Paul was warring with inside himself. Perhaps his temper. Perhaps some other temptation. Whatever it is, Paul describes it almost like an alter ego. Twice Paul says, it’s not me, it’s sin that’s doing it. And he says this sin is particularly close when what he desires to do is good.

Buddhism has a name for this concept that Paul describes. It is called “near enemy.” For example, “love” is good thing. It freely desires only the best for someone else. It enjoys the company of the other and is willing to make sacrifices for the other.

“Lust” would be the near enemy of love. Lust desires to possess and control rather than give freedom to the one that one loves.

Or compassion and pity. Compassion takes place when a person deeply empathizes with the suffering of another and is moved to alleviate that suffering; “Pity” suggests an awareness of some else’s pain, but that we are more concerned about out how their pain makes *us* feel. It indicates distance.

In any case, when Paul tries to do what is right, the thing that is wrong keeps rearing its ugly head.



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost 7/5/20

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment Christ Church, Needham, MA

*On July 4<sup>th</sup>: Our Original Sin & the Way Forward*

But Paul makes a statement here that is so important to remember.

I said earlier that our culture tends to dismiss the word sin as an uncomfortable, judgmental word. I think it is also true that many individuals have been scared with a damaging misunderstanding of their own human tendency toward sin. We can be overly harsh with ourselves.

But Paul here talks about his inmost self that delights in the law of God. His inmost self! Delights in God! This is so important to remember—that our inmost self is good. It is precious. It is holy. It not only delights in God, God delights in it. It is the very essence of who we are.

Paul's struggle is to focus on that inmost part of who God has created him to be. And so also is the struggle for us.

Paul talks about the law, a code of conduct that only goes so far.

It points out where we fall short, but does not build upon that spark of goodness, the unconditional love which resides in our inmost self.

It may be a stretch, but I think the occasion of Independence Day thrusts upon us the obligation to examine the war at work in our founding, and in our history, between the values and ideas of liberty, justice, and equality for all, *and*, the reality of racialized oppression that has prevented all the people in our land, regardless



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost 7/5/20

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment Christ Church, Needham, MA

*On July 4<sup>th</sup>: Our Original Sin & the Way Forward*

of all the rich differences that distinguish us, from enjoying the fruits of these ideas.

I've begun reading a book called America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America. Written by an evangelical pastor, teacher, writer, and magazine editor named Jim Wallis, the book examines not only the history of this brutal battle between ideals and realities in our country, but the role white Christians must play in leading a movement of the recognition of the roles we have played in blocking the flourishing of these values for all people.

We need to recognize the ways we have worked against the reconciling love Gospel of Jesus Christ, in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor Greek, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3.28)

And, with an abundance of hope, he writes that we have the scriptural and theological tools to work with our sisters and brothers of all faiths to lean into and lead the movement for repentance and reconciliation and justice. We must pray to Jesus for the urgent will to take these steps, and for the endurance and courage to remain faithful to this call for the long haul.

When the white churches lay claim to their call and responsibility to be agents of repentance for past sins of collusion with racism, and to be apostles of reconciliation, then we can help our land live up to the promise of our greatest ideals.

Amen.



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost 7/5/20

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment Christ Church, Needham, MA  
*On July 4<sup>th</sup>: Our Original Sin & the Way Forward*