

If you were here for last Sunday's service in that great Fourth of July crowd...and you were here in that heat from the air conditioning malfunction...and you were still able to listen to some of that homily...then you *might* recall that I preached about...*change*. And how our *understanding of what God wants* from us can *change*. And that *the American experiment with democracy* is a continuing process of *change*. And that we are called as *individuals* to *change*. And how, in all these ways, *change often takes a long time*.

So, I want to take that *last* point further today—the *challenge of personal change*—because that is where the scripture really takes us today. Do people *really* change? Can you tell if *you* have changed? And yet, are some of your struggles still the same? Do you ever think about things like this...maybe at 3am in the morning?

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There is definitely a sense from both the Apostle Paul and Jesus that people *get stuck*. And we are often stuck *without even realizing it*. Jesus talked about how he observed that people find it easier--not to consider themselves--but *to find fault in others*. For example, in today's gospel, Jesus referred to how people criticized Jesus' contemporary, John the Baptizer, thinking that John *was just too severe*. And yet they turned right around and criticized Jesus because they thought he *was just too friendly when he should have been severe*. ??! It was easy for people then to find fault with both John *and* Jesus, regardless of what they did.

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It is really tempting for us all to be just as *outwardly-focused*...and to look for what we think are the *deficiencies of others*. And while this tendency has always existed, as Jesus witnessed, I would venture to say that that tendency has very much *intensified* these days. Because we live within a flow of *so much information about others*—reliable or not—which invites *an endless attention outward*. Every day we can think about all the deficiencies of others. It is always the *other...other...other*.

Apparently, the Apostle Paul had been likewise tempted to focus just on “the other”. *First* it was his fellow Jews whom he deemed were not zealous enough in their faith...and *then* it was the threat he perceived in the emerging Christian movement...which *then* led to his zeal to eradicate those perceived deficiencies in others. It would seem that Paul was obsessively other-focused...*until something happened to him*. He described it as a mysterious spiritual encounter with Christ. And it was the beginning of a cascade of changes *within him*.

A big part of that change in Paul was that he was able *to see himself more clearly*...and see how much he had always been struggling within himself...and how much still remained unchanged within him. Once Paul was diverted—by Christ--from obsessively focusing on his perceptions of the deficiencies of others...*Paul was able to see his own*.

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There is a part of our worship service that is built in every Sunday--with the exception of the time around Christmas and Easter—a part of worship which we repeat every Sunday. It is the *Confession of Sin*. Definitely, a major reason the Confession is repeated over and over again, is to keep redirecting us from “the other” and into that same *self-awareness before God* that the Apostle Paul experienced.

Of course, being able to recognize our own inner struggle is not an easy place to be. Wouldn't it be so much more enjoyable if we could simply confess the sins *of others* each Sunday?! :) None of us willingly wants to go into that place of self-awareness before God where we may recognize, like Paul, “I do not do

what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”. Or, that we have sinned “by what we have done, and by what we have left undone”. That is a very vulnerable place to be.

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Listen...and I'm going to tell you a mystery. What is not obvious in vulnerable moments like that *is that we are actually being held within the mercy of God*. It does not feel like mercy. And yet, remember that Paul was not able to see himself clearly *until after he encountered the mercy of Christ*. It was *mercy* which freed Paul to recognize his own inner struggle. *It is mercy which frees you and me to see our own inner struggle*. How surprising is that?!

When Jesus said “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens”--that is a word of *mercy*...that at the same time invites us to realize *that we actually do have heavy burdens we are carrying*. And suddenly we may be aware *of both the mercy and the burdens*.

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In the clarity of both the mercy...and the unwelcome and unsettling inner struggle...that is actually where hope begins. And where *personal change* arises.

And like Paul, we may be surprised...and find ourselves unexpectedl... “strengthened in all goodness”...and “by the Holy Spirit kept in eternal life”.