

Romans 7:15-25

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

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

PLAYING FOR THE SAME TEAM

As most of you know I’m not much of a sports fan. I enjoy watching sports but I don’t spend much time doing so. I don’t know the names of more than one or two Yankees, Mets, Giants, or Jets. I don’t know any Knicks or Rangers. But one name I

learned over the last few weeks is the name Tim Howard, the goalie for the U.S. soccer team that was finally eliminated from the tournament on this past Tuesday. Howard was declared man of the match against Germany despite the fact that the U.S. team lost the game. He made sixteen saves, the most in any World Cup game ever. Someone went on Wikipedia sight after the game and changed the name of the U.S. Secretary of Defense from Chuck Hegal to Tim Howard. Even the captain of the Belgian team that defeated the U.S. on Tuesday tweeted, "I have two words: Tim Howard." Another person tweeted, "The difference between Tim Howard and Jesus: Jesus had eleven guys he could trust."

Of course that tweet was made in jest. I don't want to disrespect Tim Howard, but truth be told Jesus' disciples minus Judas were still far from trustworthy – they deserted him in the Garden of Gethsemane – they couldn't even stay awake with him when he was praying. And truth be told, Jesus blocked far more of his opponent's shots than Tim Howard did. I'm talking verbal shots. All those attempts made by Jesus' opponents to trap him and discredit him. "Look, he's picking grain on the Sabbath." "Look! He's healing on the Sabbath." "Look. He cast out a demon; he must be a demon himself." "Look! He didn't wash his hands before he ate...and look who he's eating with!" "Look! He's preaching without a Local Pastor's license." They tried to trap him with questions. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Rome?" "If you believe in a resurrection, who will be the husband a woman who is seven-times widowed when she gets to heaven?" And of course the greatest of Jesus' opponents was Rome herself, who took a very direct approach to defeating Jesus by simply nailing him to a tree. Of course Jesus went on to win the game, rising from the grave and showing that the love of God conquers all evil, including terrorism and torture. But despite Jesus' victory over his opponents, it was not an easy game to win.

If I were Jesus, I would have grown tired of blocking so many shots. I think you would too. Eventually our opponents would score against us, and once we're behind by a few points we'd get discouraged. I had the pleasure of watching my best friend's fourteen-year-old son play baseball a few weeks ago, and it was tough to watch. By the third inning the other team was winning something like thirteen to nothing. What I noted was how Bobby's team started to lose their composure – pitching, catching, fielding and hitting all fell apart leading the other team to extend its lead. Once your opponent seems to have a clear advantage over you, it's tempting to give up, to stop trying, because you feel that it's impossible to catch up. The same phenomenon occurs at work; if someone considers you a threat to their position or their authority, they'll start taking shots at you – trying to make you look bad, trying to make you fail, trying to make you lose, to keep you in your place, to "show you who's boss," literally. And you will either concede and acknowledge that they are the winners, or you will leave and seek employment elsewhere.

Sadly, the same phenomenon occurs in churches. If you have an idea and you're inspired to do something, you may run into someone who feels that their authority is threatened and rather than helping with a new ministry that person will put obstacles in your way. That person will want you to fail because your success might

upstage them, or make them look like failures, and their egos can't handle that. They'll keep kicking that ball at you, and eventually one will sail past you, and you will get discouraged. I can't count how many stories I've heard of people who left a church because someone felt threatened and started taking shots at them, because what was supposed to be a unified ministry turned into a competitive enterprise. Of course there are also those who leave the church simply because they didn't get their way on some matter. Ego collides with ego, and there are no true winners.

You see, competition is exhausting. Talk to any competitive athlete. Just look at any athlete coming off the court or field at the end of a game and you'll see. They're tired! When you compete on the job or in the church, you get tired. It doesn't matter whether you win or lose; you get tired. If you are engaged in competition in the workplace or in the church, whether you win or lose, you will get tired.

And so Jesus counsels us to avoid the whole competitive mindset. "Stop acting like children," Jesus says, on the one hand complaining if you don't dance and on the other complaining if you don't wail. The religious leaders complained that John the Baptist was too serious while at the same time complaining that Jesus was too casual. At the core of their criticism was the assertion that anything different from their own way was wrong. We often do the same thing, don't we? One person we consider a religious fanatic while we consider another hedonistic, and implicit in our critique is the notion that our belief is right – not too radical and not too casual, neither too hot nor too cold. You shouldn't run off and live in a monastery, but you shouldn't hang around with "sinners" either. You want to dwell somewhere near the center – a great political strategy, right? Aim for the middle of the road and you're sure to win an election, you're sure to be popular because you're neither conservative nor liberal. But if your strategy is to be popular by appealing to the majority, you're still in a competitive mindset, and you will try to paint your competitors as either too far left or too far right. As long as your focus is on advancing your own agenda, as long as you are trying to get your own way, you have a competitive mindset, and whether you win or lose, whether you're kicking shots or blocking shots, the game will exhaust you.

Jesus invites us to explore the alternative: "Come to me...and I will give you rest."

If we, as a church, put our egos on the back burner and earnestly seek to follow Christ, we can avoid competing with one another. That doesn't mean that we agree on everything, but it DOES mean that we seek not our own will but GOD'S will, and that means that we are PRAYERFUL in all matters. You know the true sign that a church is Christ-centered is the primacy of prayer, appealing to God as a community for guidance and wisdom. I have belonged to Christian committees and organizations that have NOT humbly gathered in prayer but instead go right into discussion, and I have seen them divide and disintegrate, because without prayer, the agenda shifts from discerning God's will to imposing particular agendas, and it becomes personal, competitive, and ugly, and the meetings are exhausting as so much energy is spent trying to score goals on one's opponents. Jesus' solution is quite simple: come to me. Make God's will your priority, and be humble enough to

accept that you're not always going to have the best idea, that God may actually give someone else a better idea than he gives you, in part to keep you humble and in part so you can better appreciate that other person.

Coming to Jesus also means putting on his yoke, or in other words, submitting to his authority, which means humbling yourself and accepting that God may use someone else to communicate a good idea, someone else to point the way that the church needs to go. This is how Jesus wants his church to function – to be united in following him. And when we are united in him, regardless of whether we all agree on a particular matter, we are freed from pride and the futile pursuit of self-aggrandizement.

I'm temporarily here at Bethel. As a matter of fact we all are. We are all moving on to glory. Someday someone will be looking over notes written a hundred years ago at one of our church council meetings, of trustees meetings, of finance and outreach committee meetings, reading our names and wondering who we were. And it shouldn't be important that they know us. Our names shouldn't matter. What *is* important is that we leave a legacy behind, that future generations who belong to Bethel United Methodist Church recognize that we as a church made a difference in this community and in this world, and if we're preoccupied with trash-talking and squabbling and promoting our own agendas we're not going to make much of a difference in the community. But if we're united in our efforts to follow Jesus Christ, and if we submit ourselves to God's authority and put on Christ's yoke, we not only have an impact upon the world, but we find peace in our hearts and minds, which in turn allows us to accomplish even more as a church since we're not wasting time and energy competing with one another.

May God help us to recognize the pride within that exhausts us in competition and impedes us as a church from effectively carrying out his perfect will. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we all could afford to spend more time and energy pursuing your will and less time insisting upon our own. Give us enough humility to know that our ideas are not always the best ideas, that others may have better ideas than we do and more wisdom than we do. Save us from exhausting ourselves trying to score against one another, from competing with one another. May we come to Christ ready and willing to put on his yoke and go about the business of building HIS kingdom and not ours. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.