

The Most Difficult Word

Sermon titles sometimes take on a life of their own, especially since they need to be fashioned in time for the bulletin to be printed and long before the sermon is fully developed. I choose two texts, and usually know which one seems to be the one which will be the primary one used, but a week of study and living with the text will sometimes change the lens for the sermon which is fashioned. To some extent that is what occurred this week. This sermon title came from consideration of the text from Romans 7 which presents the struggle which is that internal struggle that Paul describes with which we all are familiar and a commentary about that text. That commentary began essentially with a question about what characteristics make a word difficult. If I were to ask you to think of what you consider the most difficult word that you know of, what words or characteristics would come to mind? The suggestions from that commentary were that it might be words which are rarely used, like “lachrymose” or “contumacious”. I admit that although I was familiar with those words and their meanings; and that I would classify them as words rarely used; neither of them would have crossed my mind as being particularly difficult, because it isn’t usually rarity that causes us difficulty. Next, on this author’s list was “hemacytometer” or “boanerges” which he listed because spelling them correctly is difficult. Again, these words don’t seem to me to be ones that truly qualify as being difficult, because dictionaries are available for that providing that spell check doesn’t catch a spelling error these days should you actually need to use these words in something you are writing. I don’t think these types of characteristics of words are the ones which give us problems. I would suggest the one word which causes us the most difficulty from the time we first learn to use words is one of those very simple, easy to spell, easy to say ones which is so very difficult is not difficult for any of those named reasons. Instead it is difficult because of what it means when we actually use it. The word I am thinking of is “No”. This is a very powerful word when used, either by us or to us. Its most common form where we encounter it is actually when it is coupled as an instruction: “Do not...” This word or the meaning associated with it is one which is causing a great deal of resentment today; in the midst of all the discord around us at this moment for the same reasons it always does, we don’t like being denied doing what we want to do. We live in a time in which self-fulfillment has become a virtual law of the land, where self-indulgence is so highly valued that it equated as a fundamental right. The pervading mood of many seems to be that there should be no restriction on what I want to do. I still have a very clear memory of the difficulty of getting the concept of “no” through to my son when he was about 15 months old. He could say the word “no” clearly, even loudly. And we had child-proofed the house for truly dangerous things, but there were some “off-limits” things he had been told were “no’s”...like all those knobs on the stereo system in the living room which he could now stand up and reach. I walked into the living room to find him standing there using both hands to turn the knobs. When he turned and saw me...he proudly and loudly told me...No! No! No!..and kept turning them. He knew the word, and I think he even knew that he was not supposed to be doing that, but doing it was just too much fun to give up. That is very much the situation that the Apostle Paul is describing in the passage which formed the Epistle lesson this morning. We really don’t like those things...those rules...whatever form they take...that interfere with what we want to do or desire to have at any given time. We want or desire what we want, and we always have a reason for that, and that “no” always runs contrary to those reasons, wants, and desires. At the same time, we can

also recognize the value of those “no’s”, not only for others, but for ourselves. This creates the tension evident in our text. The setting of safety rules and regulations are examples of “no’s” that most of us have agreed upon, although again, they sometimes run contrary to our desires like when we ignore that speed limit sign, or eat that off-limits desert, etc. Here again, we recognize what Paul is writing about in today’s reading. It is a tension, a struggle that is part and parcel of human life. According to Paul, God provided us the law as a tool, as a guide to aid us in this struggle. Unfortunately, we tend to think of law, even God’s law negatively, because we experience it as enforcing something we do not want. It sets boundaries and tells us “no.” But for Paul, the primary purpose of the law is to urge us toward life, toward that which is healthful, life-giving, and of true value...away from those things which are harmful...even when we are lured by our immediate desires to say or do those things which lead to pain, to suffering and even to death. For Paul, this tug between what is right and what is immediately gratifying is not only descriptively accurate of the tension-filled nature of human existence, it also points to our need for help. Paul who had experienced the transforming power of God in his life was drawn to God’s law; he describes it in this text. He says there was within him a desire to be obedient to God’s will and purpose for his life day by day. But he also experienced something else at work within himself, just as it is within us. There is also this desire to indulge in something that gives immediate pleasure but which is not in keeping with God’s ways. Paul saw this as a battlefield where on one side there was God’s law calling to us to be obedient and on the other side there was this desire to accept an invitation just once cut corners or succumb to a moment of pleasure thinking that “no one will ever know” or “it won’t hurt anyone”. The text from Romans leaves us with the grace of God through Jesus as the answer to this eternal struggle; the means of our rescue. This is certainly where we need to turn in order to find forgiveness for those times when our both our commissions and omissions are not what in accordance with God’s desire for our lives. Knowing of God’s grace does not exempt us from the struggle, on some days it does not seem to make the struggle easier, but perhaps harder as we feel we should be able to do better. That seems to be a cry heard in what the Apostle Paul is writing. Sometimes, it amazes me how one of our scriptures will begin a conversation with the other as my week continues. That happened this week. As I continued to think about the dilemma this internal struggle gives us, the passage from Matthew began to also echo in my mind: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Sometimes as we struggle with this internal conflict between what we know our Lord asks of us, especially in our treatment of others and our inability to love and to cross the boundaries that exist in our society, our country, our world...we are indeed weary. We feel burdened. When we feel this way, we need to remember that this conflict is not unique to us or our time, and that God has not only provided the guidance for the way toward the light but also the way to lighten the load when we stumble. We are invited to join with our Lord, to learn and from his ways and then receiving his grace, begin anew having gained rest for our souls in his presence. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.