

What Baffles Jesus **Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19**
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV **5th Sunday after Pentecost (July 9) 2017**

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

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.’ ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹ the 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.”

“Wretched person that I am,” said Paul in this passage he wrote to the Church in Rome that he was going to visit shortly.

When I first read through this passage a few weeks back, in preparing for the dance of July 9, it struck me as sounding like the rant of a crazy person: ***I am out of control of myself. I don't know who I am. Wretched person that I am....***

I remember reading Philip Yancey writing in “What’s So Amazing About Grace,” about his encounter with a homeless unwed mother, who recently had even more bad luck. He said to the woman, “Why don’t you come to the Church and let’s see if we can help.” And he was taken aback, as was I, *then*, to read her response: ***Buddy, I just told you the problems I am having. Why do you think I would want to make it all worse by coming to the Church?***

Early historians tell us that the Church had a reputation summarized like this: ***“See how much they love.”***

That's not the reputation that Philip Yancey's companion knew of the Church.

I think she was too familiar with the reputation of the Paulians – instead of the Christians. Don't get me wrong; the apostle Paul did a lot of good things, and wrote a lot of good things. Some of my favorite scripture quotes are from Paul.

But he also had this RIGHTEOUSNESS HANGUP. He was so worried about “DO I HAVE IT RIGHT? AM I SAVED?”

I had a young woman ask me that same question in a membership class, “**Pastor. I'm worried that I've not done enough, believed the right stuff, in order to be saved.**” And I told her: “**Well, why don't you just assume that you are saved, and then start acting as if you believe it.**” (My advice was much the same as Moravian Peter Boehler gave to John Wesley, almost 400 years ago: “**Preach faith until you get it, and then preach faith because you have it.**”)

Looking at the Gospel lesson, **JESUS WAS BAFFLED BY THE REFUSAL OF THESE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE TO CELEBRATE.**

He told them stories:

- (a) man loses a sheep; man finds the sheep; man calls people together **to have a party.**
- (b) woman loses a coin; woman finds the sheep; woman calls people together **to have a party.**
- (c) father loses his son; father finds his son; father calls people together **to have a party.** Second son won't come to the party and the father says: **We had to celebrate**

Now, the Pharisees knew that Jesus was talking about them; He was playing with them – making jokes about them – it made them so mad they wanted to kill him.

And Jesus was baffled. Why wouldn't they celebrate? Why couldn't they have a good time?

You know, Jesus said that He came *that they might have life, and they might have it more abundantly.* (John 10:10b) Abundant life is hard to believe, when it comes from the life of either an Eeyore Christian, who are so much like their Pharisee ancestors – in Jesus’ words -- **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you makee him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.** (Matthew 23:15)

- **Jesus is still baffled today** when there is a need for **Tony Campolo** to write a book entitled, ***How to Follow Jesus Without Embarrassing God*** and for **Dave Burchett** to write a book entitled, ***When Bad Christians Happen to Good People.***
- **Jesus is still baffled today** when we take the gifts from God and not only remove all the JOY from them, but also turn these gifts into clubs and beat other Christians over the head with THEIR PARTICULAR INTERPRETATION OF THE GIFT, WHICH THEY ARE CONVINCED IS THE ONLY INTERPRETATION – you know, gifts like Baptism, Holy Communion, Ordination, Marriage.
- **Jesus is still baffled today** when the little girl was asked by her Sunday School teacher, **“WHO ARE PAGANS?”** And she replied, ***“Pagans are people who do not quarrel about religion.”***

Tony Campolo, whom I mentioned earlier – is a Baptist preacher, teacher, and author. By his theology I’m pretty sure that he is really United Methodist, but he still thinks he’s a Baptist.

He tells a story of once when he flew to Hawaii for a speaking engagement. The jet lag had his sleep pattern all fouled up, so he found himself wide awake at 4:00 in the morning. So he got up and went down to an all-night coffee shop close to his hotel.

As he watched the various people come in at that time of the night, he saw three prostitutes enter, at the end of their “shift” of work. One of them – Annie (I think was her name) – was telling the other two that the next day was her birthday. She also said that in her 23 years of life, she had never had a birthday cake.

After the three prostitutes left, Campolo went over to the proprietor and said that he wanted to throw a birthday party for Annie the next night – balloons, decorations, a cake, the whole deal – and said he would pay for all of it. Then he invited everyone in the coffee shop to come back the next night for a surprise birthday party for Annie – and to bring a friend.

And so it happened: the next night the place was all decorated and more people showed up than the night before to yell “Surprise!” to Annie when she came in with her two prostitute friends.

Annie couldn’t believe it. She was shocked and then began crying. She ran out of the coffee shop but returned a few minutes later, saying that she had gone to call her mother to tell her.

After the party was all over, and Campolo was paying for the party, the coffee shop owner asked Tony Campolo what kind of work he did. He said he was a preacher.

The owner said, “What kind of religion are you. I’ve never seen any religion like this.”

Campolo thought for just a bit and then said, “I preach at a church that worships a God who throws birthday parties for hookers – that’s what kind of religion.”

I love that story. I told it at my last appointment, right before I moved to Saint Marks. Coming to the “big city” of Charleston, I told [my wife] Jane that I thought I wanted to start a ministry with prostitutes. She advised me to not start off my ministry here with that. *Sometimes* I listen to her... But ... you know ... fourteen years later, I still haven’t started. Maybe, it’s time.

What kind of Christian are you?

- Are you a Christian that believes we are all broken and going to hell unless we find the right beliefs, the right statement of faith, code of conduct, or something to get fixed, to get saved from an eternal damnation, to which none of us would ever condemn our own children?

- Or Are you a Christian who knows that, despite our own good intentions, we all end up messing up and yet Jesus loves us, as He has always loved us – as *beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold* – and that NOTHING can ever separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus? (Romans 8:38-39)
- Are you a Christian who knows that none of us has all the right answers, and that we all struggle along trying to get it right, and learning as we go?
- Are you a Christian who knows, like Jesus tried to show: we need to party. That we **NEED TO CELEBRATE.**

Jesus is still baffled today, I think, by how many descendants of those Pharisees are still hanging around: GRUMBLING – about this or that or the other. And ***what is even more amazing than how offensive they are***, is ***how much of the time they are constantly TAKING offense at others' conduct.***

But, even still, Jesus keeps on telling the story: **God wants to give us ALL a party. Won't you come?**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.