

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 9, 2017

“The Battle for Control”

Romans 7:15-25

Do you ever wonder why people do some of the crazy things they do? People are amazing! Ask Dr. Tucker Montgomery. Dr. Montgomery spent fifteen years as an Emergency Room doctor at the University of Tennessee Hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee. Dr. Montgomery has seen a multitude of injuries that result from simple stupidity. He tells the story of one man who was brought in to the ER with serious injuries to his face and teeth. The Dr. was appalled to learn how the man injured himself. While drunk, this man had been driving around his neighborhood lighting firecrackers off his cigarette and then throwing the firecrackers out of the window. He was having a grand time until he accidentally threw his cigarette out of the window and stuck the firecracker in his mouth.

Do you sometimes ask that question: Why do people do the things they do? Here is a better question. Have you ever asked why you do the things you do?

Have you ever battled for control of your own life? Some of us fight that battle every day. The discouraging truth, however, is that our main adversary is not someone in our family or someone at work or someone who is angry at us. The enemy is us!

It's been said that there are only two pains in life the pain of discipline and the pain of regret, and that discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons. There are many of us who can sympathize with the apostle Paul when he writes: read Romans 7:21-24

“When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Can there be a more relevant passage of scripture for many of us? The battle for control. Plato once said, “For a man to conquer himself is the first and noblest of all virtues.” John Milton put it like this, “He who reigns within himself and rules his passions, desires and fears, is more than a king.” The question is, how is it done? How do we become more than kings? How do we win the battle for control of our own desires and actions?

We begin by acknowledging that nobody can do it for us. The battle is our own. Nobody can fight it for us. This doesn't mean that the world does not lure us. A familiar ploy of slave traders before the Civil War was to lure unsuspecting Africans onto ships by using red cloth. It was a familiar story among slaves. A group of children would be playing. They see a red flag flying in a distance. They become curious as to what the red flag is and run to it. On approaching, they are grabbed by some white men and put on a ship. This ship takes them to Virginia where they are sold. One former slave said that she always hated anything red because that was the color used to lure her forever away from home. She often was heard saying, “Oh that red rag, that red rag brought me here.” There are many red flags in the world that lure us. The decision to give in to their lure, however, is our own.

There is a great story about a forester named Sam. Old Sam would be chopping down a tree. You could hear him say one phrase: “Oh, Adam, Oh Adam.” Every time he hit that tree, he'd say, “Oh Adam.” One day the foreman came by and asked him, “How come every time you hit the tree, you say, Oh Adam?” Sam said, “Because Adam, my forefather, sinned against God. God cursed him and said that he would have to work from that time on. So, every time I hit this ax against a tree, it reminds me that if Adam hadn't sinned, I wouldn't have to work.”

One day his supervisor came and said, “Come here, Sam.” He took him to his big, plush ten-thousand-square-foot mansion. He said, “It's all yours. You can live in it; you can do whatever you want. You've got a swimming pool, a tennis court, servants, everything. Everything in this house is yours. I'm giving it to you because I don't want you to struggle with that Adam mentality. I ask only one thing: Don't lift up the box on the dining room table. Enjoy everything else in the house, be what you want to be, do your own thing, but that box on the dining room table, do not touch.”

Sam said, “No problem. I can handle it.” So, Sam played tennis every day, went swimming, ate three meals a day. But after five months, he saw that box. That bothered him. He wanted to know why, if he can have everything, that box was so important. He said, “No, I'm not going to touch it; I'm not going to jeopardize my time here.”

After a year he had tried everything. He had gotten used to everything. There was nothing new anymore. There was only one thing in that house, and that was the box. And so, one day, when nobody was looking, he lifted up the box just a little bit. Out of that box ran a little, teeny mouse that hid, and Sam couldn't catch it and couldn't find it. The supervisor came and noted that the box had been lifted. He went to Sam and said, “Now Sam, I warned you. Go back into the forest and pick up your ax and chop again.” The next time the supervisor came by he heard Sam saying, “Oh Sam, Oh Sam.”

Sam came to see that he couldn't blame his predicament on Adam, only on Sam. We begin to win the battle for control, first of all, when we recognize that nobody can do it for us.

We begin to win the battle when we acknowledge that we can do better. We are not genetically defective. We are not hopeless cases. We are capable, competent, conscientious folks who have been fashioned in the image of our Creator. This means that we have the power of choice. We can decide. And we can follow through with our decisions.

A man went to Saks Fifth Avenue to buy some pajamas. He noticed on the pajamas a label that said, "shrink resistant." He wondered, "What does that mean? Do they shrink, or don't they?" He asked the sales lady: "What does it mean when a garment says, 'Shrink resistant? Does it shrink or not?'" The sales lady said, "Sir, it means that it will shrink...but it really doesn't want to."

You and I are not a pair of pajamas. We are free moral agents. We can decide. We can set goals. We can do better than we are doing. We can take one small step at a time with our eyes firmly fixed on the man or the woman God has created us to be. That battle will never be easy, but it can happen. We can't save ourselves from sin, or free ourselves from the habits of sin that hold us in bondage. There is a Messiah who will help us if we choose to. We can choose to invite this Messiah, whose name is Jesus, into our hearts, and when we do, a miracle takes place—a process of change begins that continues as long as we allow him to control our lives.

That's how it works. There is a battle going on within each of us. Nobody can fight the battle for us. We must do it ourselves. It is a battle we can win. We are children of God and he will be with us every step of the way if we're willing.