

**Sermon: The Split Self****Scripture: Romans 7:14-8:17****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: July 3, 2011**

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The Apostle Paul is writing about this universal reality of the human condition when he speaks very personally and honestly about his own struggles. He says: “the things I want to do I find I don’t do and the things I do not want to do I find myself doing.” But even in the saying of that he also recognizes that there is a part of him that can stand back or transcend himself and say “I am this way or that way”. What a strange thing! The conscious self. He is not just a self but a self conscious of himself recognizing that there is this dual reality, the “me” who is enslaved to sin, as Paul puts it, and the “I” which is conscious of it, disapproves of it, or knows of and wants something more than such enslavement. He wrote this over 2000 years ago and yet we read it today and cannot deny that it is as perceptive and dead-on accurate as any modern scientific theory of human psychology. It’s something we read from the old pages of this ancient text and gasp in surprise at how such a strange man from a distant time and different culture could possibly know us so intimately. Which of us have not struggled with exactly what he is talking about – wanting to do more, knowing we must do differently, insisting that we must change, recognizing that there is a better more life-giving way of being – and yet remaining stuck in patterns that just bring us more struggle, suffering and death. There is – simply and undeniably - the way we are and then there is the way we would like to be or know we could be and it is exactly there in that split, in that fundamental and heartbreaking human reality that religion sets up camp and begins speaking big and heavy sounding words like damnation and salvation, fallen and redeemed, evil and good, original sin and repentance, words and ideas that we have often tried to replace with other safer, more politically correct, less harsh words and ideas but which only fall short of really speaking to this great rift within us, between who we are and who we know we can be.

It’s a deeply personal rift in our very fibers that manifests outwardly in warfare between nations, in the desecration of the earth, in the splintering of relationships, in the addiction to substances and the attachment to things, despite the very real heights and beauty also expressed in the healing of disease and the toppling of dividing walls, in the

nonviolent rising of the oppressed and in communal efforts to live more sustainably, in the effort to find peace in the heart and the making of peace between neighbors. The height and the depth are both evident in our individual lives and our global lives as a human species and that is the torque that often our religion and so many of the great spiritual traditions of the world seek to address.

Obviously Paul was no less a stranger to the divided self, than we are now. He experienced it by trying to follow faithfully the law of Moses and then falling into frustration and despair that he couldn't do it, that the restraints of the law, the requirements to do this and not to do that almost made the don'ts all the more alluring and the do's all the harder. Remember, it's also there at the very beginning of the Bible – whatever you do don't eat the apple – and Eve says “man, I didn't even notice that apple but now it's looking really good.” The irony of being human – we have everything we need...but that looks good over there too.

But then Paul has this remarkable mystical experience, this awakening, this conversion moment that changes his life forever more. He speaks of it as a meeting with the resurrected Christ, a blinding light, a voice from heaven that had a very particular effect? This mystical experience blinded him, made him helpless and utterly vulnerable. He was blinded and in order to recover his sight he had to go into the very community that he was trying to violently eliminate. He had to walk helpless and vulnerable into his nightmare, into enemy territory. And there his eyes were opened literally and figuratively. And he found in that great surrender of his life that the great rift within him was mended, at some deep fundamental level, there was a wholeness not that he accomplished himself but that was in some remarkable miraculous way accomplished for him and he found that he was suddenly on the inside of this global and historical project to reconcile, to mend, to redeem humanity, one heart at a time.

We are divided creatures, somehow not at home in our own skins, our own lives and yet the very fact that we know we are not, the very fact that we have this conception of a home beyond the divide, is evidence of its reality, otherwise we wouldn't even know to wish for it or to want it. As Frederick Buechner says “Christianity is mainly wishful thinking, even the part about judgment and hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept. Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is

wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking. Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it....wishing to be nearer to our God, always nearer to God.

### Nearer My God to Thee

D A7 Bm G D A

1 Near---er, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!  
 2 *Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,*  
 3 There let the way appear, steps unto heav'n;  
 4 *Then, with my waking thoughts bright with Thy praise,*  
 5 Or, if on joyful wing cleaving the sky,  
 6 *There in my Father's home, safe and at rest,*

D A7 Bm G D A7 D

1 E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,  
 2 *Dark--ness be over me, my rest a stone.*  
 3 All that Thou sendest me, in mercy given;  
 4 *Out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise;*  
 5 Sun, moon, and stars forgot, upward I'll fly,  
 6 *There in my Savior's love, perfectly blest;*

D G D A

1 Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee.  
 2 *Yet in my dreams I'd be, nearer, my God, to Thee.*  
 3 Ang---els to beck---on me, nearer, my God, to Thee.  
 4 *So by my woes to be, nearer, my God, to Thee.*  
 5 Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee.  
 6 *Age af--ter age to be, nearer my God to Thee.*

D A7 Bm G D A7 D

1-6 Near-er, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!