

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost • July 9, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Romans 7:14-25a

“The Augsburg Confession: Sin and Free Will (Articles II, XVIII, and XIX)”

Take your pick: you've been poisoned or you've been infected with malware.

You might not notice the problem at first. Going along your merry way, you think everything is just fine. Then, things start to go awry. Stuff stops working the way it's supposed to. Maybe it happens quickly, maybe slowly. Once the problem has reared its ugly head, though, you realize what's happened. You're in trouble. In fact, if you just let your situation continue as-is, you're going to lose everything. Life isn't looking all that great anymore. But the worst part of your predicament might just be that you don't have any way to fix it. You don't have an antidote or cure to get rid of the stuff that's wrecking everything.

That's pretty much the nature of sin.

Both today's reading from Romans and the articles from the Augsburg Confession that we're looking at today speak to the problem of sin for us human beings. While these writings come to us from times of history that might not seem all that similar to our own, the nature of sin hasn't changed. It's an inherited condition, passed down to each child of man across our history. We still carry it with us everywhere we go.

The Augsburg Confession refers to the concept of “concupiscence.” Concupiscence is our inborn inclination toward sin, the rebellion against God that every one of us has inherited from Adam and Eve. You might have heard of the idea of “original sin.” That's the poison, the malware, that has worked its way into our minds and hearts even before any of us had any say in the matter. We are, in the words of Article II (1-2), “born... without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence.” When it comes down to it, God's Word – and our Lutheran confession of the Christian faith – clearly states that sin is a fatal condition. That's the truth about sin: we are born eternally dead. There's nothing in us that gives us the ability to turn to God or come to him. Rather, we're set on a course away from God even as we first enter the world.

Why do you think that people are reluctant to admit, “I am sinful?” Maybe it's because they think that makes them less worthy in the eyes of the world, or maybe it's simply because they think that only the great big, bad stuff that someone does is sin, if there's sin at all. People are reluctant to acknowledge the reality of sin in our world. Confronting sin in your life will make you uncomfortable. It's more pleasant to tell yourself that you can be good and do good. Why think about the bad when you can just ignore it?

Humanity's relationship with God was wrecked with our fall into sin. Our confidence in our human ability turned us away from our Creator. That same misplaced confidence in our human ability keeps us thinking that we could turn back to Him and reconnect with Him – if we really wanted to. But turning back towards God isn't an option that human beings have. Sin takes hold of human life and controls it. It's kind of like a rocket that is being pulled in towards a planet with no fuel left in its tanks. There's nothing that rocket can do to turn around and escape.

You might be wondering, “Don't human beings have free will?” You can make choices about what clothes you'll wear, what food you'll eat, and how you'll spend your free time. You can decide which career you want to pursue. Those types of choices are what we'd call “things below.” Yes, you have the ability to make free, rational choices in such ordinary things. Even non-Christians exhibit what we'd call “civil righteousness,” doing good things for the benefit of others. Our underlying problem, however, is that human will – and more specifically, our inclination – is in captivity to sin. Like the rocket trapped in a planet's gravitational pull, sin keeps us turning towards our doom.

In our standing before God, there's nothing we can do to reconnect with Him. What can a dead log on the floor of a forest do to reconnect itself to a tree? Self-assured confidence in a nonexistent ability is doomed to fail. The rocket can't turn itself around. The victim of poison or malware can't make himself better. A powerful, external force must intervene if there's going to be any hope of rescue.

God alone overcomes sin. You and I need God's intervention to turn us from our doom, to bring the cure to the fatal problem of sin. And that's exactly what God does. He sent Jesus, His Son, to bring life to people who were born dead, people like us. Through Christ you are forgiven of original sin and concupiscence, the inherited condition that would turn you away from God. In Jesus, you have the antidote for the poison that would kill you and the cure for the infection that would wreck you.

God doesn't stop there, either. The Holy Spirit has come into the lives of all those called to faith in Christ. Your intention, your will, is renewed by His working. He puts new life into your mind and your heart. He overpowers that inherited inclination to sin and turns you around. The Holy Spirit is at work to move you, the Christian, to both desire and do good.

That said, both Scripture and our Confessions acknowledge that sin will continue to be a problem for all people throughout life's journey. In our reading from Romans 7, Paul speaks to his own situation of being trapped in sin's pull. Even for the Christian, what you *will* and what you *do* get disconnected. You might want to do the right thing, but you don't. That's part of what we mean when we say that a Christian is both 100% sinner and 100% saint. We still struggle against sin's pull. We still fall to it. But for our own well-being and for the good of our neighbors, we will always look to and point to Jesus as the one who reconnects us with God and with each other. He is the only antidote, the only cure, the only hope.

As you go out this week, take a look around you and see civil righteousness at work – in the lives of Christians and non-Christians, alike – for the good of our community and our nation. Notice, too, humanity's inclination to obey evil impulses in our captivity to sin. And above and beyond these, remember God's forgiving love for you in Jesus, confessing your sins that you may know the greatness of God's grace in Christ.

We were born with minds and hearts poisoned by sin, infected by a will inclined away from God. But Jesus is our antidote. He is our cure. He is our hope.

Amen.