

Sweeter than Corn-on-the-Cob

Proper 9, Year A – Romans 7:15-25a

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 6, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I really wish they would make a law or something that said that a holiday can't fall near a weekend – especially in the summer, for Pete's sake. It just makes for too good of an opportunity for folks to head to the beach, or to the mountains, or to granny's house – and then church pews are empty Sunday morning. Of course I don't begrudge anyone the chance to celebrate the many freedoms we share, including the freedom from relig... or rather, the freedom *of* religion. Oh, well – *you're* here, and I'm here, and I'm absolutely sure God's here, and for the moment, anyway, that's what counts.

Because of the happy abundance of our kids taking advantage of the Diocese of Kentucky's summer camp programs, over the last couple of weeks, I have been up and down the road to All Saints Camp and Conference center a *bunch*. I have had the joy of sharing the delight of kids' chattering excitement on the way, eager for new adventures with old friends. I have taken equal pleasure in hearing the tired murmured stories from the lake or the pool or the dining hall as heads nod on the way home. And I have been keeping my eye on the fields that line the Audabon and the Natcher and the Western Kentucky Parkways there and back. As if it was happening right before my eyes, just in these last couple of weeks it seems, the fields racing by at 70-some miles per hour have gone from that vague green blur that means that *something* has been planted, to mile after mile of tobacco and soybeans and corn. I have paid special attention to the corn, and during this last Friday's trip I noticed with satisfaction that in many fields the corn is tassle topped and the silk is on the ear, and I found myself literally salivating with the fact that it is finally time!

Since I was a kid when my school teacher family fled the dry heat of Phoenix every summer to visit family in the productive hills and valleys of Ohio, I have been nearly in love with the early summer ritual of eating corn directly from the cob: The smell of the parched husk of the char-cooked delicacy that we used to call "roast'nears," or the hiss of the steam rising off a boiling pot. The grainy crunch as salt and pepper are mashed into a stick of margarine to make "corn butter." The exploding taste of milky sweetness as teeth scrape kernals row by row. Even the happy chore of wiping my chin after every bite to catch dribbles of corn and melted butter. For about as long as I can remember, I have equated a juicy ear of sweet corn with summer itself.

Unfortunately, my body has changed since those lazy summer days of yore – well, in a lot of ways, of course. But while I may love corn-on-the-cob just as much as in my salad days, it is the sad truth that corn no longer loves me. These days, almost as soon as I take the first nibble, my belly starts to object, and it usually goes quite a ways downhill from there. I won't go into all the gruesome details of my discomfort. Suffice it to say that if the same effects were produced by, let's say, green beans, I would gladly refrain from ever partaking of another single bean. But never fail, even though I know that it's going to cost me, when the opportunity comes again to slather a golden ear with that salt-and-peppered butter, and crunch juicily into those delectable niblets... well, let me just admit that my supper last night included corn on the cob, and that I have a handful more ears waiting to light up the rest of the week. I just can't help myself – it's a sickness, I suppose.

In this morning's lesson from his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul points out the nature of our problem as human beings who have been saved by Christ's work on the cross. "I do not understand my own actions," he says. "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." "For I do not *do* the *good* I want, but the evil I do *not* want is what I do."

It's a concept deeply rooted in the philosophy of Paul's own day. But all of us more modern thinkers know the same concept by *experience*, don't we?

We pray to be forgiven and to be given the strength to live lives that give glory to the one who has saved us. We trust with all our hearts that the forgiveness that Christ promised is the forgiveness that we receive. And the next day, the next hour, the very next minute, we are back again quietly hating our neighbor and reviling our enemies. We are back again nursing our secret little personal sins. We are back again playing fast and loose with the truth, using any little tidbit we can get ahold of to drive a wedge between our friends and *their* friends, sticking it to others before they have the chance to stick it to us.

We come to worship to give glory to our creator and redeemer. We resolve again to lead "a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways." By faith we eat of his body and with thanksgiving we drink of his blood, trusting his holy assurance that we will be sustained. But before we can get home again, we have made the same mistakes, we have given in to the same base nature, we have slipped down the same slippery slopes. And we find ourselves wallowing again in self-pity and self-loathing over the fact that we have once again missed the mark.

What are we to do? In spite of the assurance that we are saved by the power of Jesus' own righteousness, we see that the law of sin and death still grabs at us, pulling us again and again away from Christ and into its own strong hold. We know that we do not *want* to do the wrong thing. We know that it is not good for us, that our system will wither and rebel. And yet we've just *got* to go there, we've just *got* to take just one more bite, seemingly *drawn* to eat the fruit of our own destruction.

"Wretched man that I am!" Paul cries. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" It is a cry that we all understand all too well, a cry that we claim for ourselves, a cry that echoes in our *own* heart of hearts. "Who will help me do what I know I should?" "Who will let me do what I truly *want* to do?" "Who will break this endless cycle of sin and regret?" "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

But you see, for Paul that is *not* a cry that goes unanswered. As plaintive, as disconsolate, as *desperate* a cry as it is, Paul's answer is equally triumphant. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

As strong as we know the law of death to be, there *is* a power that is greater. It is the power that takes hold of the chains of our sinful nature, the chains that hang heavily around us, pulling us down. It is the power that lifts those chains and *shatters* them to pieces. In sending his own Son into a world bound and fettered by the enormity of *our* sin, by binding himself to the brokenness of the human condition, by taking that brokenness and slavery onto himself, God repaired the break and shattered the bonds. In spite of our nature to turn again and again to the bondage we have cast off, in Jesus Christ, we are slaves of sin and death no more. "For freedom," Paul says elsewhere, "Christ has set you free!"

As sinners cleansed from our guilt by the power of the blood of Christ, we are no longer bound. We are no longer slaves! We are free! Free to return the love of God that found us lovable before we were even born. Free to revel in that precious love. Free to know that even when we fail and fall, our Savior stands beside us, not with condemnation, but with love deeper than the universe itself. Free to respond to that kind of love with praise. Free to respond to that kind of love with hope. Free to respond to that kind of love *with* love... for one another.

Ah, there's the rub. "For freedom, Christ has set you free!" A pretty good motto for this particular weekend.