

It's Complicated!

sermon digest

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Romans 7:15-8:6

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"It's complicated!" is a modern idiom used to close a conversation about a subject that you don't want to discuss. The line was familiar enough to form the title of a 2009 comic movie about a middle age couple (Meryl Streep and Alec Baldwin) whose entangled relationship results in a romantic rendezvous ten years after their marriage had ended in divorce, in spite of commitments to other people (like Steve Martin) and the potential discovery by their adult children. It was also the favorite line of Jake, the kid in "Two and a Half Men," to avoid the interrogation of the adults in his life. Whenever Jake was cornered with a demand for an explanation of his bad behavior, he simply waved off the question with "It's complicated!" In other words, "If I were sophisticated enough to explain my behavior, you are not intelligent enough to understand."

The complexity of good and evil defies every simple explanation. Had the line been available to the Apostle Paul, it might have served as shorthand for his complex attempt to explain his continued struggle with sin in spite of his knowledge of the law of God. Instead of the tongue-twister, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do," Paul could have dismissed his behavioral struggle with "It's complicated!" His embarrassing confessional statement, "with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin," reminds me of the dualism presented in the old Tom and Jerry cartoons. In the struggle with conscience, periodically Tom the cat or Jerry the mouse would have a vision of an evil self with horns and a good self with a halo vying for control of his behavior. In my childhood, Tom and Jerry cartoons were classic explanations of my own struggle with temptation. I had a clear understanding that being human meant some kind of internal warfare between good and evil. Like Paul, I could also take myself off the hook by saying that my bad behavior was an alien presence of a lure within. Paul settled it: "It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within." So did the Flip Wilson character Geraldine: "The Devil made me do it."

Later in life, I realized that my childhood understanding of evil was a reflection of the evolution we find in the Bible. Early Jews viewed evil as a byproduct of human freedom under the ultimate control of an all-powerful God, but the problem of locating evil in God always lingered in the background. The Babylonian Captivity exposed Jews to Persian dualism and the possible source of evil outside of God. Persian theology viewed human life as a reflection of the eternal struggle between two gods, good and evil—Tom and Jerry on the scale of world religion. Thus, Persian influence on Jewish theology led to the emergence in the New Testament of Satan as the personification of evil. But dualism was only one of many attempts to explain evil in biblical evolution. The issue with which Paul struggles on the personal level is the question of the ages.

Following two world wars and the new threat of nuclear world suicide, Archibald MacLeish wrote the play "J.B." on the Book of Job to address the question of the ages, the dilemma of evil. MacLeish concisely stated the struggle to understand the presence of evil through the Satan figure Nickles: "I heard upon this dry dung heap That man cry out who could not sleep: 'If God is God He is not good; If God is good He is not God.'" In theological jargon it is called *theodicy*, the justification (explanation) of God. Thomas Long cites Bishop Berkeley's comment that philosophers are people who kick up dust and complain, "I cannot see." We preacher types are likely to advise against the philosophers that some questions should not be asked even in the face of science that suggests the ability to explain everything. Maybe, just maybe, it is time for us to admit to ourselves and the world around us that some things cannot be concisely explained. It's complicated.

Beware of simple explanations; life is complicated. One of my early seminary professors John Newport served as interim pastor for a congregation in Oklahoma. He shared with class his encounter with the influence of Oral Roberts on members of the congregation. One elderly lady struggling with declining health sent regular contributions to the Roberts ministry. As her health continued to grow worse in spite of her prayers and belief in miraculous healing, she wrote Oral Roberts for an explanation. In desperation, she turned to her pastor. Oral Roberts had explained that the answer was simple: "Either you do not have enough faith or there is sin in your life." Newport counseled the lady and instructed his students that life and the problem of evil and suffering cannot be wrapped up in the simple formula sin versus faith. Look out for the easy answers to ultimate questions of life.

The journalist H. L. Mencken was famous for his cynical one-liners. He was prominent as a reporter to the nation on the Scopes Trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. In spite of his simplistic dismissal of religion,

he sometimes got it right. He left a word for later generations worthy of the faithful: "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong."

Ockham's Razor is a principle of reason that is still claimed as the guide to solving great problems. The principle locates truth in simplicity; the simple answer is usually better than the more complex one. Perhaps in the 14th century era of William of Ockham, simplicity was the better measure of truth, but his formula has not fared so well in the modern world. In the discovery of DNA as the basic organic building block and in probing the depths of nuclear science the simple answers had to be abandoned for the complexity of measured reality. Such was the case of viewing the creation historically as a six-day act of God or scientifically as the evolutionary development of eons of time. The simple answer may be easier to grasp, but it is not easier to reconcile with the nature of God. Our vision of God is enlarged by the discoveries of the majesty and complexity of the universe.

The physicist-priest-theologian John Polkinghorne has turned the simplicity question back on his cynical science colleagues. He observes that scientists who deny the existence of God tend to reduce the universe to bits and pieces and fail to see that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The problem of reductionism is the oversimplification of facts and the failure to recognize the high complexity of relationships. Quantum mechanics is unpredictable precisely because we cannot grasp the intricate interactions within atoms. Even the complexity of third grade arithmetic becomes a problem if you dare to ask what is the four from which we get two plus two. Two men and two women add up to a larger concept we call human which is comprised of both.

For the people called Shakers, simplicity was the highest virtue. This unique American cult, gathered around the unusual beliefs and complete authority of Mother Ann Lee, sought to center life in complete, simple devotion to Christ. This simple life had both a negative and a positive. One had to abandon the world and all of its lures, then to accept the discipline and life-style of the Shaker community. One had to leave behind not only vocation and property but marriage and family to become the bride of Christ, the family of God. This extinct faith community was an enigma. Having abandoned the world, the Shakers became a highly productive community of work and commerce, possessing both wealth and property and leaving behind not only quaint little villages but amazing inventions useful to the world of work and commerce. Their institutional existence belied their claim to have found the simple life. The denial of the sexual self and the nuclear family unit led not to the utopian world of the Kingdom of God, but to the demise of the movement and the failed attempt to build the very community they valued.

Aaron Copeland immortalized the Shaker religion in his symphony "Appalachian Spring," building on the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts"; but the complexity of life on this planet must challenge the Shaker assumption that the truth of God is simple. Folks who have reduced the meaning of the gospel to "Four Spiritual Laws" popular in the early 1970's or the Christians of the early 20th century who reduced the faith to "fundamentals" that must be believed need to take another look at the gospel of Christ. Jesus was no reductionist; the message of his gospel is complex enough to wrap around the diversity of all the people of the world.

God is beyond the complexity of our wildest imagination. Actually I don't have a beef with Paul's frustration with self. He begins with confession: "I do not understand my own actions." Thomas Long tells how the Swedish New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl addressed the work of Paul to a gathering of the American Psychological Association. He disputed the popular practice of making Paul the subject of modern psychoanalysis. He declared that Paul was not on the psychiatric couch trying to find himself; he was a man searching for the God of grace. Paul was primarily a preacher. Much of what we read today was a rhetorical overstatement that every preacher can recognize. It seems that Paul put himself in the center of the struggle with good and evil not only because bad memories like the stoning of Stephen, but because of present struggles with his unfinished self. It may have been mere rhetoric, but Paul put himself in the same human boat with the people we like to hate—Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Charles Manson, or, in current news, Ariel Castro. Paul did not measure sin by the degree of evil we can detect in our distorted view of each other; he acknowledged what he had already declared to the Romans, "all of have sinned" including Paul. Specific acts outside the law were all a part of the big word SIN.

If Paul cannot understand himself and his own failures in life, he certainly is not capable of understanding and explaining a gracious God. I admire Paul for his struggle. Paul struggles with his own behavior problems and dares to hold up a mirror before all of us to see that the struggle is a real part of life even for one we have learned to call "Saint Paul." Paul the theologian also holds up a mirror for all of the

great thinkers of history who have God captured between the covers of a book. He proclaims the God beyond our simple explanations. Perhaps Paul's greatest statement of his faith for folks like us is the doxology of Romans 11:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.