

Sermon: Proper 9A

Title: St. Paul and Mr. Hyde

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One of my all-time favorite books is *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Lewis Stevenson

It's one of an entire genre of books written at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, that deal with the duality of human nature. Other examples of stories like this would be *Frankenstein* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both of which I absolutely adore.

You may think you know it, but I strongly encourage you to actually sit down and read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It's a little more nuanced than Warner Brother's cartoons would tell you.

Dr. Jekyll lives an upstanding and virtuous life. He's a doctor, he's a gentleman, well respected, lots of friends, successful. But he has within him the desire to sin.

And he is very aware of himself as a sinner. He enjoys the sinful things he does. Like ya do! The behaviors and habits and practices that we have that are not beneficial to our body or our pocketbook or our culture or relationships or our lives, we don't do these things because they're unpleasant, we do them because they're pleasant! And we each choose our own sin, according to our particular character and likes. This is why there are so many different things that you can be addicted to. When we choose to sin, it comes from the same nature that inspires our virtue.

Dr. Jekyll puts it like this

So profound a double dealer, I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead Ernest. I was no more myself when I had laid aside restraint and plunged into shame than when I labored in the eye of the day at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering. (p 77 of the Peter Pauper Press 2024 edition)

The virtuous and sinful sides of Dr. Jekyll are both real parts of him. So, he decides to use his skills to separate those parts of his character. So that he can be entirely virtuous. His goal initially is to eliminate the sinful side of himself and be entirely virtuous. This is not as absurd as it sounds - this is a distant cousin of abstinence, an

absolute “bright line” solution to the problem of temptation. But what Dr Jekyll finds is that in separating out the sinful side of his character, he has simply created another man: Mr. Hyde. He hasn’t eliminated his sin, he has empowered it.

The novel is brilliantly written. It’s the kind of book where you underline so much of it that it would almost be easier to blackout the parts that you didn’t highlight. So I commend the story to you, even as I’m about to spoil it for you.

In the end, Dr. Jekyll seeks to destroy Mr. Hyde. He has initially tried to separate out his sinful self from his virtuous self, and in so doing he loses control of both selves. Ultimately when he tries to kill Mr. Hyde, of course he also dies.

Because we are both virtuous and sinful. We have the capacity at any moment to be generous and compassionate, and be a blessing in this world, or to indulge in our sins and give into our temptations and be a curse

We have free will.

That is arguably, the trickiest part of God’s creation of human beings: He gives us free will

Saint Paul is wrestling with exactly this problem in our text this morning.

*I do not understand my own actions
For, I do not do what I want
But I do the very thing I hate
I can will what is right, but I cannot do it*

Saint Paul here is talking about sin. We know this because he says “I can choose, but I do not choose” to do what I know is right. Sin is when we have the power of free will and making good choices, but we use our free will to sin instead.

Now, I seek here to make a distinction between the sin that Saint Paul describes, and the battle of the wills that exists in Jekyll and Hyde. I wish to distinguish that from addiction disease.

When an individual begins to consume an addictive substance, or indulgent and addictive behavior, at the beginning, they have free will. When they first begin these habits, they can still choose not to indulge. But overtime neuropathways are formed that gradually remove our ability to use free will - or to do so easily and without

intervention. What begins as a habit becomes addictions, and every time we indulge in the addictive behavior we reinforce that neural pathway.

Imagine a heavy ball bearing rolling down a steep hill of sand. Every time you roll that heavy ball bearing down that sandy hill, you dig a trench. The trench gets a little deeper every time you send that ball down that hill. Until one day, when you put the ball at the top of the hill, the trench is so deep and so accustomed, that the ball cannot go any other direction except in that direction.

That is a very reductive description of what addiction disease is, but what is important to understand is that at some point in their relationship with the addictive behavior, the person loses their free will. Their brains and their bodies literally drive them to the addictive behavior chemically and neurochemically. So, I want to be clear that a person who is suffering from addiction disease, whether it's a substance, a behavior, gambling, heroin, alcohol, food, whatever it is, is not sinful. Well, it may begin in sin, but at some point the addict is literally physically programmed to do that behavior. The behavior is still wrong, people and things are injured, harm is being done to the addict and others. But if they are physically and chemically programmed to the behavior, is there free will? And if not, is it sinning? I don't believe it is.

That is not to say that addiction disease is hopeless. There is always a way back, there is always repentance and return. The reason I go to such lengths to describe addiction as a disease is because with treatment there is a cure. But the first "step" we all know, is admitting we are powerless.

I've spent considerable time on the subject of addiction in part because addiction disease is a thing we should be talking about, and yes from a pulpit. But also in order to distinguish the extreme case of addiction disease as different from the inherence of sin that St. Paul is talking about this morning. We all sin, but, thank God, not all of us have addiction disease.

So, taking addiction disease out of the equation, we look at the conundrum with which Paul is wrestling in this letter to the Romans in a personal way.

None of us are perfect. We struggle and we wrestle, and we strive, but we are not ever perfect. Only God is perfect. Sadly, our culture offers us no grace in this area. Throughout the history of humanity there have been models of perfection toward which we are supposed to strive... and failing to achieve that perfection is perceived as complete failure.

In the 21st-century perfectionism has become absurd. Not only can we surgically and chemically alter our own forms, but we can alter photographs, we can change perspectives and alter the images so that physical perfection is literally fictional. Google the word “looksmaxxing” but not while you are eating.

And success in our culture is similarly polluted by perfection. Social media tells us that the wealthy live more glamorous, healthier, happier lives, that money does buy happiness. And those of us who are regular human beings, wake up every morning not wealthy enough, not powerful enough, not successful enough are therefore not happy.

This is the moment in which we find Saint Paul. But we read this text of the letter to the community in Rome, out of context. Paul is describing that horrible moment when we wake up in the morning with a hangover and self-loathing, but throughout the rest of the letter, he describes the grace of God in that moment. Throughout the letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that God knows us. God created us and knows us intimately. God knows when we’ve sin, and God has already forgiven us. God knows that we’re flawed, and God loves us unconditionally.

^{5:3}Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope.

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Look, we all experience the duality of human nature. That is the human condition. It’s mimicked perhaps a little bit by Jesus himself who is entirely divine and entirely human. We are entirely virtuous, and entirely sinful. And God loves us unconditionally. If we were perfect, God would not love us more and when we sin God does not love us less. That is the unconditional love of God and it is the good news of God in Christ.

So what do we do with it? Perhaps this is an invitation for us to try to see ourselves the way God sees us. To try to love ourselves with a fraction of the love that God

offers us. To try, when we sin and feel remorse, to repent and return to God saying to ourselves, “God has already forgiven me, I need to learn to forgive myself.”

That is the invitation in this text. Can we turn away from the condemnation of society and approach our own imperfection with even a fraction of the love that God offers us?

The mistake that Dr. Jekyll makes is trying to separate out his evil side. The way forward, the way to wholeness, is not to try to eliminate our sinful side, but to embrace it, love it, and strive every morning to do a little better than yesterday. Self-loathing, blame and shame have no place in the kingdom. So, if we are to journey through our lives with this duality of our natures, we must do it by loving our whole selves, as God does.

God is yearning for us to be more virtuous, God desires for us to be blessings to one another and not curses. But that’s a journey, not a destination, and along the way God is loving us. In our entirety. Is it possible, then, for us to love what God loves, and love ourselves into healing and wholeness?

Perhaps we might be guided by the words of St. Paul again:

^{6:13}Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.

¹⁴For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.