

Doing What I Don't Want
The Rev. Amy Spagna
July 5, 2020 – Pentecost 5A (Proper 9)
Romans 7:15-25a

My friend Alex is a serious cartoon aficionado. Back before I went to seminary, she and I would almost always go to see whatever new release had come from Pixar or DreamWorks within a week or two of its opening. One of the more underrated ones we saw is the 2007 Pixar movie *Ratatouille*. It's about a French rat named Remy, who has aspirations of becoming the next great Parisian chef. Remy finds an opening in the person of Alfredo Linguini, a hapless redheaded young man who has to prove he's actually the son of the late luminary chef Auguste Gusteau and the rightful heir of Gusteau's restaurant. Linguini can't cook at all, but after he catches Remy fixing a pot of soup which Linguini almost ruined, the two of them strike up a partnership. Remy cooks, by hiding underneath Linguini's hat and pulling his hair like a marionette to control his actions. Even when Linguini can't, or doesn't want to, chop and stir and create, Remy is there, making him do it. Eventually their secret gets out – and when it does, neither of them can escape the truth of who they are. Remy is a rat. It's in his nature to steal food from humans. Linguini has no culinary skills of his own to speak of, despite the high expectations placed on him because of his heritage. And both Remy and Linguini have to fight their impulses to revert back to “type” when the going gets tough.

While these two characters provide a good metaphor for the struggle we all face in doing what we don't want to and sometimes feeling like we can't control our own actions, what Paul is talking about in this 7th chapter of Romans goes way beyond not messing up the soup. He's pushing out his argument about the external forces which enslave us into the realm of the practical challenges of living life in Christ. We've jumped ahead half a chapter

from last week, over Paul's assertion that the law cannot curb sin all by itself, and straight into an astute observation about human nature: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom 7:19-20, NRSV)

Paul is very quick to separate the "I" from the sin that makes "I" not do the good. This reinforces the idea that to be human is to risk being controlled by some external force. Paul didn't invent it on his own. It comes from a particular line of Jewish thought prevalent in the first century which focused on living a righteous life now so as to guarantee salvation later. Human nature is but one of the concerns these thinkers raised. As described in a section of Dead Sea Scrolls known as the *Community Rule*, human nature is characterized in part by an "evil impulse" and a "good impulse" which are both implanted in the self, and which are at war with one another. Paul names that duality as the principle underlying what he describes next: "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand" (Rom 7:22)

The internal struggle between what we know is wrong, but can't resist doing anyway – for example, the moment where Remy, in a moment of anger at Linguini, lets his enormous rat family into the restaurant to pillage the walk-in refrigerator – is, in theological terms, a battle between sin and righteousness. Sin has the insidious and unique ability to take our good natures and twist them to the point where we are rendered totally helpless, or at best unable to behave from a place of moral or ethical grounding.¹ At our core, we want to follow what God has laid out for us. However, our false selves – the selves

¹ William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 4." <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpPentecost4.html> [accessed June 29, 2020].

we construct early on to help us navigate the world – want something else. As long as we fail to let go of that false self and its demands, we remain stuck and unable to move toward goodness.² No amount of outside urging to do what is right and obey the law will achieve much until our false selves are addressed and allowed to die.³

Paul is not an advice columnist nor a trained therapist, and so he offers very little in the way of practical advice in terms of how to overcome this challenge, beyond trusting in the freely offered grace inherent with a life lived in Christ. So how do we deal with the constant struggle to overcome the “evil impulses” which push us over the edge into doing what we do not want? Sometimes, we can’t overcome them at all. But, we can learn to take responsibility after the fact, make amends, and move forward. The process of getting to that place is one of conversion, which Martin Smith, in his book about sacramental reconciliation, describes thus:

“The breakthrough to responsibility is in itself a deeply healing moment for many people. They find their feet on the solid ground of reality, in contrast with the fantasy state of self-righteousness... In taking responsibility before God for the wrongs we have done, we recognize that we need and want to be regarded as accountable. So confession is often the beginning of... the need to choose, to commit ourselves and shape our lives purposefully and consistently. It can be the beginning, too, of a new attitude to the good in our lives. If God treats my sins as responsible personal acts, while taking account of the pressures which contributed to them, so God treats my good deeds as real acts of

² Richard Rohr, “What Is the False Self?” <https://cac.org/what-is-the-false-self-2017-08-07/> [accessed July 2, 2020].

³ Loader, “First Thoughts.”

mine, though they are all responses to grace, the stimulus of the Holy Spirit. I can begin to dare to look upon the good I do and am enabled to do as something wonderfully substantial, 'fruit that abides,' 'treasure in heaven,' which delights the heart of God and which God is overjoyed to cherish and multiply."⁴

For Remy the Rat, this breakthrough came in the form of a conversation with the ghost of Chef Gusteau. He urged Remy to get back into the kitchen and help Linguini out in the face of a visit from Paris' harshest food critic – because, while he is a rat, Remy is, at his core, a chef who belongs in the kitchen. In that same way, so are we exactly who God has created and called us to be. We are a people who are basically good, who basically do good deeds, and are able to overcome the impulse to act otherwise. We can do it because God, in the person of Jesus, has rescued us from this body of death. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

⁴ Martin L. Smith, *Reconciliation: Preparing for Confession in the Episcopal Church* (Lanham, Maryland: Cowley Publications, 1985), 44.