

“Christ, The Faithful Rescuer”

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 7:14-25a

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Romans 7: 25a

I heard a story recently from a grown man who said that he made thirty attempts one day to get on his bike and ride it down the street. He continued the story by saying that thirty times in a row he did not succeed. It was not that he did not want to. It was not that he was not willing. It was not that he did not try. He simply did not have the ability to do so. He was not able.

As the conversation went on I learned that this whole episode took place in the person’s dreams. He had one of those dreams where he tried with all his willpower, over and over again, to accomplish something successfully but simply could not succeed.

I could relate to that experience. Perhaps you can too. I have had dreams in which I tried to do something successfully and could not do it. Professionals tell us that these kinds of dreams are usually the result of stress and anxiety in our lives surrounding a big life event. Maybe there is a speech you have to give. Maybe there is an event that you are in charge of organizing. Maybe there is a race that you have trained for and are anxious to run. Maybe there is a move to a new location and/or house that is coming up. Maybe you have an upcoming surgery scheduled. The dream doesn’t necessarily have to do with the event itself. It could be some other event or activity that becomes the vehicle or outlet for our anxiety, stress, and worry over the thing being done successfully, according to the standards we have set for ourselves. And in our dreams a greater reality is revealed—*many things in our lives are out of our control*. Even when we have the willpower and desire for a certain outcome, we may not have the control or ability to see it through according to our desires. We feel captive and enslaved.

The small portion of Paul’s letter to the Romans that we have before us today is well-known among Lutherans. It names a struggle, a struggle much larger than trying to successfully ride a bike, give a speech, or plan an event. It is a struggle that exists not in our dreams but is an everyday reality. It is the struggle between sinner and saint. This struggle is real and hidden in the heart of every person. Some people confess this struggle openly, asking others to help them in relationships of accountability; other people hide this struggle, putting on the best face they can. All people, however, suffer this struggle and it is not something that can be suppressed in our subconscious only to be awakened in our dreams. Until the day when our conqueror and faithful rescuer, Jesus Christ, returns, we will be involved in this real, continuous struggle of being a sinner and a saint.

Paul’s description that we heard in the small portion of his letter is personal and individual. It tells the story of one man and one struggle that never seems to end. The fact that it is a present, ongoing, continuous struggle is made clear in the fact that, grammatically speaking, the Apostle uses present tense verbs to describe it. Paul *continually* knows the good that God desires and Paul himself agrees with this desire. He *continually* acknowledges that what God wants is good. Yet Paul also discovers that he is “sold under sin” (7:14). Paul uses the language of slavery and of captivity. His members *continually* “wage war” and he is “captive” to the law of sin (7:23). Paul *continually* knows the

good that he wants to do, but he is *continually* unable to do it. Instead, he finds that what he doesn't want to do, that he does. A slave to sin, a captive to his flesh, Paul is out of control of his situation. Over and over again he does not succeed. He cries out for deliverance.

Paul's story, however, is not the story of only one man. This is the story that touches all people. Paul's cry is that of Cain, knowing the good that God wants him to do and yet also knowing the evil that is close at hand. Joseph's brothers, knowing the good care and concern they should show their brother and yet also knowing the evil judgment and sale of Joseph into slavery that eventually overtakes them. David, knowing the good rule of his kingdom and protection of his people that God desired and yet also knowing the evil pleasures of adultery and the murder that he could use to cover it up. From individuals to families to nations, this captivity continues through the ministry of Jesus. On the night of Jesus' betrayal, Peter, knowing the good that he wanted to do in following Jesus to death and yet knowing the evil that he does in denying his Lord in the courtyard. This captivity continues to our own lives today (adapted from a sermon by Dr. David Schmitt in the series, *God's Greater Story*). Paul's one small story is the larger story and experience that we all know so well.

Yet, Paul also wants to tell another story. In fact, there is a much greater story, the story of God that Paul wants to highlight for all people. This story of God is a story of faithfulness. Not our faithfulness to God but God's faithfulness to his promises that he made to his people.

As early as the fall in the Garden of Eden, God had begun telling this story of his love. As Adam and Eve stood there, naked before God, ashamed of themselves, and yet unable to hide, God began to speak of his love. They overheard the story of God's love in a conversation he had with the serpent. God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring; *he* shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15, emphasis mine). Here, was the first glimpse of God's promise. The greater story of God. He would send one, an offspring of a woman, who would bruise the head of Satan and conquer in the fight. So Adam and Eve lived in hope even as they continued in their struggle. The individuals, the families, the nations that followed them lived in hope of this story of God coming true. And the apostle Paul writes this letter to proclaim that it did come true, in Jesus Christ. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24) Paul cries out at the very end of this short section of Paul's letter to the Romans. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 7:25a)! In this section of the letter, Paul confesses that his one small story of his personal and individual struggles is part of a much larger story. The story of Jesus Christ, our Lord. He is the one who came as our deliverer, our rescuer. We delivered him up to death as Satan worked through us to bruise his heel and yet he delivered us from death and from the kingdom of Satan as he revealed his power in his resurrection and called us into the kingdom of God. At the end of his letter to the Romans Paul can even say, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom 16:20). This God loves us, dies for us, and rises to give us new life (adapted from a sermon by Dr. David Schmitt in the series, *God's Greater Story*).

We participate in God's greater story of faithfulness in the present every time we kneel together to receive communion. Here, in a very tangible way, Jesus brings you once again to the heart of this greater story of God. As we gather for the Lord's Supper, we are connected to the much larger story of God's loving rule over his world. This is the story of Jesus, our Deliverer, now come among us. The one who rules the world has lifted his hand in eternal blessing and we now come and receive his body and

blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Yes, we come with our all-to-real, smaller, private stories, the moments when the good that we wanted to do, we did not do and the evil that we didn't want to do we did. That struggle is there and it is real and we came today confessing our sin. We did so at the very beginning our Service this morning. But we also come trusting in our deliverance. Jesus is faithful. He remains faithful to his promises. "Take eat. Take drink. This is my body. This is my blood. Given for you. For the forgiveness of sin."

Our Lord rules. Jesus is our Deliverer. He succeeds where we cannot. He is faithful where we are not. In his hand is power and blessing and here, this day, we find mercy in his body and blood given and shed for you. At the Lord's Supper we are joined to this much larger story. The story of God saving the world in Jesus. His mercy extends to us and he continues to rule until the end of the world. Amen.