

I'm reminded of the stray cat who adopted a couple. The husband, allergic to the cat, decided to drive him to another neighborhood and to release the cat to adopt someone else. The man dropped the cat off about two miles from the house, then ran a couple of errands before going home. When he arrived, there was the cat waiting at the front door. Frustrated at being outwitted by a cat, he dropped the cat off four miles from home. The cat came back.

Bound and determined to get rid of the cat, the man drove ten miles, using a circuitous route to throw the cat off the trail. He turned left and then right, then left again. After dropping the cat off, he drove a few blocks and double checked his rear view mirror to make sure the cat wasn't anywhere in sight. He drove to the edge of town and then wandered through unfamiliar neighborhoods. After driving for nearly an hour he called his wife and asked, "Is the cat there?" "Yes," she responded. "Well, put him on the phone. I'm lost!"

What is the cat in your life? Most of us have something in our lives that we wish would go away: some mistake, some error in judgment, some sin we've committed that haunts us. But, like the cat, it keeps coming back. In an extraordinary moment of vulnerability, the Apostle Paul admits that he had his own sin addiction. In Romans 7, he describes his struggle: *I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me* (14-17).

God's laws are good: they reveal the joyful, happy life God intends for us. Yet we are slaves to sin. A slave does not get to choose; a slave does what the master commands. Sin becomes an evil master over our life. We want to be independent and free, but sin holds us captive.

Have you ever made a promise to stop doing something? Ever said, "God, I promise I won't answer the phone when sin calls!" But we break that promise, and then we feel shame. And sometimes sin calls back, and we answer again. The cat keeps coming back.

And the cat is different for each of us. For some it might be our tongue that lashes out and hurts others. For others it might be clicking on the wrong website. For some it might involve lying or cheating or jealousy or bitterness. For others it might be a hardness of heart that cannot allow forgiveness or reconciliation to grow. For some it might be the sin of pride or ambition. For others it might be poor self-worth. Whatever the cat, the truth is we all sin sometimes.

The Bible says as much: *No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and [God] will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the testing [God] will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it* (1 Cor. 10:13).

There are no new sins. It's all been done and said before. A case can even be made that all sins are rooted in one of three areas: money, sex, and power. And maybe all three can be blamed on our ego. We twist the gifts God gives us to suit our own ends. No one is blameless, no one is off the hook. Right about now, I suspect, most of us are thinking about something we did yesterday, or last week or twenty years ago for which we are ashamed. We know the sin that trips us up: it is ever before us, right in the front of our mind. I've got my cats and so do you. We know what causes our heart to stray from God.

Now here's the question: What happens inside our minds after the sin? Ideally we confess the sin, receive God's forgiveness, claim the grace of God in our lives, and we move on. Sounds easy, but sadly it's not usually that clear cut. Most of us, after we sin, beat up on ourselves for making a mistake. Our minds become a spiritual battlefield. This, according to Paul, is where the devil steps in and accuses us of being terrible, horrible people. The devil wants us to feel guilty. He is the "accuser" who condemns us.

There's no question that sin is bad; but we make things worse when we buy into the devil's lies. Who hasn't heard in their head, a little voice saying, "You're an awful person! God's very disappointed in you! God can't love you anymore, you are a sinner." The writer of James gives us a word of hope when he says, *resist the devil and he will flee from you* (4: 7).

The Apostle Paul felt trapped in this cycle of guilt and negativity. He prayed and asked the Lord to set him free. Three times he prayed and asked God to make it stop, to take it all away; and God responded: *My grace is sufficient for you*.

In Paul's own words: *Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me* (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Paul believed that God allowed him to fight this spiritual battle in his heart and mind in order to keep him humble. Being human, making mistakes, letting the cat get the better of us sometimes: these things should help to Re-Mind us and reorient us toward God and God's kingdom. When we screw up, God invites us to be humble and to try again to take our thoughts

captive to Christ. God invites us to see ourselves, with all our weaknesses and faults, as God sees us: creatures made worthy in Christ Jesus. The goal becomes to reduce the amount of time we beat up on ourselves after we sin, and to see how quickly we can move back into God's ever-present, ever-available grace.

Think back to those smiley faces and sad faces. After a sin, how many smiles are you seeing and how many frowns? Some of us feel so guilty and accused that we see almost all frowns and no smiles. I know people who have beat themselves up for years after a sin; it happened ten, twenty years ago, yet they still feel guilty about it. They think God is angry with them. They feel shame. They feel worthless.

But this is not how God intended for us to live. We are invited to confess our sin and to return to grace as quickly as possible. The longer we feel accused and guilty, the less we feel connected to God. And when God offers us a smile, we keep seeing frowns.

Growing in grace means spending less time beating up on ourselves, and more time appreciating God's mercy and love. If we start with a ninety-nine-to-one ratio, ninety-nine hours of beating up on ourselves to one hour of grace, growing in God's grace means moving toward a fifty-fifty ratio. How good would that feel? Now try to imagine an eighty-twenty ratio!

Asking God to help us find the smile means learning to let go of the guilt and to live in the grace God extends us in Jesus. We're not there yet, but we can live and move a little closer to it each day. On this Christ the King Sunday, when we celebrate the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ, it's good for us to Re-Mind ourselves that one day there will be no more sin and no more tears, no more crying or pain, and no more death *for the first things have passed away* (Rev. 21:3-4). This is possible because Jesus is not frowning at us, Jesus is smiling at us. He loves us, and we just need to be re-minded of that again and again.

Prayer: Lord, you are merciful, and you provide grace and mercy in spite of my sins. Lord, I need you now in my life more than ever. I'm not perfect. At times I sin, knowing it's a sin. Lord, I need your grace in my life to provide strength, because I am weak. I face temptations every day, and I wish I could say that I always walk away. I cannot do this alone. I need you to give me the strength and provide me with the guidance to overcome these desires to sin. I ask you to come into my life and offer your grace. I am open and ready to accept it. Allow my heart to always focus on You and make my desire to live for You. I want to be better. Lord, help me be better. Help me see the clear, narrow path in front of me so I can walk in your ways and in your glory. Lord, help me find your smile. In the name of Christ, I pray. Amen.

Lord, Help Me Find The Smile

Sunday, November 22, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Romans 7:14-25; 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

You see smiley faces everywhere: on bumper stickers, t-shirts and posters. Even our smart phones can send a wide variety of emoticon smiles to match our moods. I heard about an interesting experiment using those smiley faces. The experimenter displayed a picture of one hundred faces – some smiley and some sad. In one picture there were ninety-nine smiley faces with only one sad face. Another picture had ninety-nine sad faces and one smiley face. When showed the picture of the ninety-nine smiley faces, people spotted the one sad face within a few seconds. However, when the same people saw the picture of ninety-nine sad faces and only one smiley face, they took much longer (over a minute) to spot the smiley face. Some people never saw the smiley face at all.

The scientists performing the experiment concluded that we are naturally wired to quickly spot signs of danger. We're quick to find the sad face amid the smiley faces because it's part of our natural defense to notice a stranger whose demeanor makes us uncomfortable.

While I appreciate this interpretation, I am struck by another possible interpretation: it's generally easier for us to see the negative than the positive. For example, if you received ninety-nine compliments and only one criticism, which are you more likely to recall? Most of us fret unnecessarily about the one criticism.

This week we're wrapping up our November series "Re-Mind Me Again, Lord!" We've reflected on how we tend to carry hurtful, negative messages in our minds and we've asked God to Re-Mind us again to take our thoughts captive to Christ. We've discussed that many of us tend to compare ourselves to others and asked God to free us from that trap by helping us to see ourselves as God sees us. And last week we considered what it might mean to step up, as Isaiah did, and live as an exclamation mark in the world, making ourselves more available to God.

Today, to wrap things up, we'll be asking God to help us find the smiley faces in life instead of the frowns. When we ask God to Re-Mind us, we are really asking God to help us shed old habits and patterns, and learn new ways of thinking and acting. We are asking God to teach us how to put aside the negative and sinful things that drag us down, and teach us how to focus on the positive and uplifting things in life.