

+ I stared at the chalkboard in the seminary classroom. My family history was there as a genogram, a map of relationships. (Thankfully, there were only three of us in the room!) The relationships were laid out from my husband and my son in a tree that spanned three generations. In black and white, all of the conflict, all of the comedy and tragedy, all of the repeating dysfunction was in front of me. The crazy and weird stuff I already knew. My family loved telling stories about each other. What I'd not seen before were the systemic choices that just kept repeating over and over.

Until that moment, I didn't understand that I was caught up/brought up in a system. And unbeknownst to me, that system influenced the choices I made, and I had no idea that it existed. That's how I discovered that I had to make choices to break away of the system. In fact, those 'breakaway' choices led me here.

Now, the system wasn't "bad". It was just a system. We all live in them. Our families, our workplaces, our institutions, they are all systems. Yep, churches too. And, all systems work to maintain themselves no matter the size or complexity. In doing so, those involved in the system settle into their roles and generation after generation continue to repeat the patterns that create identity.

When I read this section of Paul's letter to the Romans, I wonder what Paul's genogram might have looked like. In the New Revised Standard Version, Paul seems racked with guilt. He's conflicted regarding why the sin inside him seems to take over, even when he's chosen the correct path.

He knows what needs to be done, he just can't seem to do it. Or worse, he does the exact opposite of what he knows he needs to do.

He knows the law. He knows the rules. Why is this so hard?

You tell me.

It could be our systems trying to keep themselves alive. It could be a lack of spiritual fortitude. It could just be irresistible temptation – like having that bowl of ice cream when you know you need to lose weight. The point is, we don't always measure up. It's easier to blame "the devil" than examine your life, your system, and make the choice and do the difficult work to change yourself and the system. As a matter of fact, it's impossible.

In *The Message*, Eugene Petersen uses these words to describe Paul's dilemma. "I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?"

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

Gerald May, a psychiatrist and theologian affiliated with the Shalem Institute, describes the processes that lead to addictions. What is interesting is that he recognized not only chemical dependencies but also psychological dependencies such as work, performance, being liked, intimacy, and (believe it or not) helping others. His work with addicted individuals taught him that we all have addictions – substances or actions or systems – that we need to recognize. These addictive behaviors set up a dynamic where we think that we can overcome our own adversities, to power through our difficulties, without the intervention of a spiritual power outside ourselves.

Our Twelve-Step Friends understand this. Whatever devil they face, they know they have no power over it. It is only through a Higher Power that they can be free. It is only by holding each other accountable that they can make their sobriety last one day at a time.

If we can do this examen of our own natures, it becomes much easier to see it when we are faced with a demon beyond our nature: the inevitable “hitting bottom”. Come to think of it, “hitting bottom” is a great theme for 2020. “Hitting bottom” works because it takes a crisis point to get people out of their inertia and complacency and do something. It’s a funny metaphor – it symbolizes the lowest one can go while, at the same time, providing the crisis that it takes to move forward.

Paul knew that. He hit bottom literally! Thrown to the ground by a blinding light, he had to rely on one of the people he was on the way to persecute. He heard Jesus call him out and experienced grace through the faith of Ananias. It took weeks of prayer, learning to receive grace, and care on Ananias' behalf for the scales to fall from Paul's eyes. Reconciliation takes listening, humility, and faith that God will lead us on our way. It was true for Paul. It's still true today.

We're not going to be able to make it through the coronavirus pandemic alone. As separate individuals, we might be able to keep ourselves safe. If we all work together for good – to keep each other accountable for our behaviors and respond in love to those in need – the pandemic's life span can be shortened and eventually eradicated. Today we need to drop our instincts to save only ourselves.

Our moral imperative is to take on and live as the Body of Christ in this time. It's obvious that laws alone won't work. Our nation's lack of agreed moralities, and the supposition by some that "for the common good" is not in line with current events, keeps us from social behavior with an overarching sense of love for neighbors. It's only grace that provides us with hope – grace from God manifested in Jesus, the Christ.

With grace, we can lay down our needs for power and attention. With grace, we can hold each other accountable in loving ways. Even in these days of Eucharistic fasting, we remain the Body of Christ. We are Christ for each other; we must be Christ to the world around us. Our brothers and sisters – all created in the Image of God – are counting on us, just as we are on them.

Be safe not only to save yourselves and your families in this time of pandemic and social dis-ease. Humble yourselves to do those things that will save others also. It's what Jesus would do...and did.