

TOTAL "REPAVITY"
Sermon, July 5, 2020
Texts: Romans 7:15-25; Matthew 11:25-30

You've all heard the proverb, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." One aspect of this proverb means people often intend to do good things but much of the time, they do not make the effort to actually *do* those things **at all**. "Oh, I've been meaning to *(fill in the blank)*, but I never got around to it." (*For the Time With the Children I distributed "Round Tuits", a wooden coin with the letters "TUIT" inscribed ... the obvious pun being now that you got a Round Tuit, you can get done those good things you've been meaning to do.*) Another aspect of this proverb is that well-intended acts can often wind up having disastrous results, something many if not all of us know from at-times bitter experience. Good intentions can, and often do, diverge to destructive and even evil ends.

Interestingly, the original proverb is "**Hell** is paved with good intentions." No prefatory "the road to..." As we normally associate *pavement* with *roadways* on which we travel toward a certain destination, the three words "the road to" got added. We set out on a particular course of action with the best of motives, only to see things come terribly undone along the way, winding up where we had never planned to go. In fact, some would venture to say that the road to hell *must* be paved with good intentions. Otherwise, who would choose such a road? Now, please hold that thought.

I'd like to excerpt a portion of the President's Independence Day speech from Friday night at Mt. Rushmore:

"Our Founders launched not only a revolution in government, but a revolution in the pursuit of justice, equality, liberty, and prosperity. No nation has done more to advance the human condition than the United States of America. And no people have done more to promote human progress than the citizens of our great nation. It was all made possible by the courage of 56 patriots who gathered in Philadelphia 244 years ago and signed the Declaration of Independence. They enshrined a divine truth that changed the world forever when they said: '...all men are created equal.' These immortal words set in motion the unstoppable march of freedom. Our Founders boldly declared that we are all endowed with the same divine rights — given us by our Creator in Heaven. And that which God has given us, we will allow no one, ever, to take away — ever. 1776 represented the culmination of thousands of years of western civilization and the triumph not only of spirit, but of wisdom, philosophy, and reason. The radical ideology attacking our country advances under the banner of social justice. But in truth, it would demolish both justice and society. It would transform justice into an instrument of division and vengeance, and it would turn our free and inclusive society into a place of repression, domination, and exclusion." (emphasis added ... slc)

The Road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Or, as the original proverb puts it, "**Hell** is paved with good intentions." I find that an interesting contrast with Heaven, where streets are paved with **gold** ... solid, substantial, valuable, precious gold! Hell is a dark and horrid place of repression, domination, exclusion. It is that dark, empty, value-less, unproductive, dreary, lifeless and ultimately horrible place "paved" with misdirected devotion, destructive passion, good deeds left undone, promises left unkept, commitments not carried out.

There is a very real sense in which the way we live and what we actually DO helps determine what kind of pavement will be under our feet for eternity ... but that's almost another sermon.

The hellish pavement of good intentions ... I think that's at least part of what Paul is writing about in today's reading from Romans. "*I do not understand my own actions,*" Paul writes, "*for what I want to do I do not do, but I do the very thing I hate. ... For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*" Paul isn't just speaking about himself; he is describing the universal human condition. Human sin, human depravity, affects everything and wreaks havoc with our good intentions. In the Presbyterian tradition, we call this the doctrine of Total Depravity, meaning that sin has infected every aspect of human endeavor. By Total Depravity the theologians *don't* mean that we are rotten to the core, as if there was no vestige of good in us at all, or that we can't ever discern right from wrong. Indeed, there is *much* good in us. After all, we were made by God in the image of God, and **God is good (all the time!)**. God's announcement at creation is that we, too, are good – very good. But shortly after that announcement, something went wrong. Sin entered the created order with a power to so distort and corrupt things that you and I now not only find it extremely

difficult to consistently do what we know to be right, but we often do the very things we did not want to do. Paul is writing about people like himself who would much prefer to be good rather than bad, right rather than wrong, loving rather than abusive, generous rather than stingy. In short, Paul is writing about people with good intentions. Again, that road to hell *must* be paved with good intentions. Otherwise, who would choose such a road? But the frustrating thing is, for the most part, we *do* choose that road

Depravity is defined in the dictionary as “*deviating from what is moral or right or proper or good.*” We don’t hear too much about sin any more in our day and age. Now most people don’t blame their problems on being depraved but on being **deprived**. “*Somebody took something away from me.*” “*I was cheated.*” “*It’s not my fault.*” As a result, people tend to live in either resentment of being deprived, or they to live in fear of being deprived. Either way, resentment and fear tends to lay pretty bad pavement to an ultimately dismal destination.

Paul is talking about people like himself who would like to be good rather than bad, right rather than wrong, loving rather than spiteful and mean. Paul is writing about people like all of us here this morning, those who really are striving to be faithful! And one aspect of his warning is this: It is precisely among the people of God that the reality of sin can be at its most powerful. Evil will precisely be at its most aggressive against those who are seeking to resist it, among those seeking to live holy lives; it’s a war. That is why our resolve to seek God’s will and be faithful so often leads us into behavior which is less than we intended, because we are in a battle with opposing and even unseen forces. That is how behavior we believe to be serving God can actually serve evil’s purposes if we are not careful. This is precisely how a group of religious leaders, leaders who were so intent upon serving God, wound up crucifying Jesus. They thought they were being faithful. They had good intentions.

Paul continues, “*So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind. ... What a wretched man I am!*” Paul then poses this question: “*Who will free me from this body of death?*” And then, Paul goes on to answer his own question: “*Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!*”

To expand on his concise answer, Paul infers Jesus alone can and will free us from this inherent, infectious human depravity. Left to ourselves, we are trapped. Armed only with willpower, we will lose. The remedy is not merely more willpower. The remedy is for us to acknowledge our weakness and ask help from Jesus Christ, Who promises us in our Gospel reading, “*Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me ... you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*”

In the very little time remaining, I just want to point out that a yoke performs two major tasks: (1) it enables the master to direct a creature, using and channeling and directing that creature’s strengths to produce beneficial, rather than destructive, results. And (2) a beast of burden is often yoked with another, in order that their *combined* strength can perform tasks the one could not do alone. The “yoke” of Jesus performs both these tasks. As we come to Him, as we learn to follow Him, He calls forth the best in us, enabling us and guiding us to utilize the best of our abilities and strengths to bear our burdens, perform our duties and carry through with our intentions to do *good*. He harnesses our strength under His guiding hand. And He not only guides as the Master, He also simultaneously and graciously comes up alongside us and **YOKES HIMSELF TO US** ... in order to help us bear things we cannot bear on our own, strengthening and empowering us to use our gifts and strengths in productive and good and beneficial ways.

The sermon title is a bit of a reach; it is a bad pun that acknowledges our Total Depravity, our condition of needing constant and thorough guidance, constant and thorough correction, constant and thorough direction because of our sinful natures and deceitful hearts which are so prone to go off track and barrel down those roads paved with good intentions but leading to destructive ends. *Total Repavity* connotes that yoking to Jesus Christ is something that involves the *totality* of all we do, minute by minute, day by day, step by obedient step we are laying a new pavement ... re-paving the path before us, not with good intentions, but re-paving it step by step with obedience in matters small and large as we walk side by side with Jesus, yoked to Him. It is when we cut loose from Him, when we go out of step with His ways, when we deviate from His guidance and direction, that we wind up on destructive paths, no matter how noble our intention(s).

And the way He takes us as we walk with Him is the Way to a heavenly destination, where the streets are paved not with good intentions, but with gold.