

July 9, 2023 – Romans 7:14-25a

In the first century A.D., the Emperor Caesar Augustus popularized a well-known concept in ancient Rome known, in Latin, as the Pax Romana. The Peace of Rome. It was the idea that Rome could only guarantee its citizen's safety by constantly flexing its military muscle. Such that the rest of the world was either too beaten or too afraid to pose a threat.

And so the emperor was always a symbol of both power and mercy. Of violence and of peace. You can see it displayed even in Roman artwork. There was an artifact dug up in the ruins of Pompeii. It was a silver chalice found in the home of a wealthy family. And there were two scenes depicted on each side of the cup.

On one side sat the emperor in full armor being handed the world on a platter by Mars, the god of war. On the other side sat the emperor again, this time with Venus, the goddess of love, beside him. Stretching out his hands in a gesture of generosity and mercy. War and peace. Power and mercy. These were two fundamental aspects of the Roman emperor.

And what Paul tells us in our Epistle today is that these are also two fundamental aspects of God almighty. God is powerful and God is merciful. Just like the emperor. Only more so because he doesn't just think he's a god, like the emperors did. He really is the one true God.

And I guess that makes sense to us, that God would have these two sides. But I'm not sure we understand why that's important. And I'm not sure we're very good at remembering that both sides exist.

After all, it's much more comfortable for us to simply remember God's peaceful, merciful side. The side that is loving and compassionate and forgiving. And that encourages us to be the same. Because that side of God isn't very threatening. Everything that God says becomes merely a suggestion. To be heeded or ignored at your pleasure. It's easy to hear God tell you to turn the other cheek when you know you can slap God in the face and he'll just turn the other cheek to you as well.

But there's more to God than his mercy. There's also his power. And that... frightens us. There's a reason the Bible uses expressions like "the fear of the Lord." God in all his power is terrifying. And, at times, more than a little disturbing.

I mean, drowning nearly the entire population of the earth in a flood? That's a little dark. Telling your chosen people to slaughter thousands simply because you've decided that there's this chunk of land you want them to have? That's not very nice. Killing your own people because they complained a little too loudly or lied about the size of their offering? Where's the compassion in that?

But God does it. And we accept that he does it. We don't deny that those things happened. But we don't like to think about it. We certainly don't like to talk about it. And in general, we'd much rather push that part of God into the corner and focus on the nice, tame, rational God we have over here who's all about peace and love and mercy.

The problem is that just as the Romans needed an emperor of both war and peace to insure their nation's safety, we need a God of both power and mercy to insure our salvation. We need a divine pax romana.

Because we're in the middle of a war. And when you're at war, you need a powerful leader. You need a leader who isn't afraid to fight. You need a leader who can be, even, a little ruthless. A little frightening. A little disturbing. Because you'll never beat the enemy otherwise.

And that's especially true in this war. Because the war that Paul lays out isn't a war between nations. Between people. It isn't even a war against Satan and his demons. Paul's war is with his own flesh.

His own brain, that produces sinful thoughts. His own body, that enjoys sinful pleasures. He describes it as two laws at work. The law of his mind and the law of his flesh. The law of his mind is the Spirit of God dwelling within him. Telling him what is right. It is the mind of Christ. That desires good things. Righteous things. Holy and godly things.

The law of his flesh is his... flesh. His physical body. We often use the term “flesh” as a symbol for our sinful desires. But I honestly believe that Paul means his actual flesh and blood here. Because this flesh and blood that we live in is corrupt in its very substance. If it wasn't, we wouldn't grow old and die. At Adam's fall, our very flesh and blood was cursed by sin.

And now this brain inside our heads, that was designed to think Godly thoughts, and this flesh, that was designed to feel Godly feelings, all of it is sinful. Right down to our DNA. And I mean that literally. Our Bibles use the word “members” in this passage. But the Greek word Paul uses there is actually a word that means “the defining substance of which something is made.” Our DNA. Our very genetic code, is a part of the law of our flesh.

Which wages war against the law of our minds. Against all the good that God has put into our hearts. Until, like Paul, you wanna scream in frustration. Because you know exactly what you're supposed to do and you Just. Can't. Do. It.

That's the war we fight. A war with ourselves. With our own humanity. How can we possibly hope to fight Satan and his demons – how can we possibly hope to fight the world and all its temptations – if we can't even win the war with the stuff sitting between our ears! We are utterly doomed. *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. That's Paul's answer to the entire dilemma. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. There is so much in this one little phrase. It declares that God acted through Jesus Christ. That Jesus is the fullness of God made flesh. All of God's power. All of God's mercy.

The one God that we like to split in half, like the two sides of that cup in Pompeii, is made whole in Jesus Christ. God's frightening power joined with God's sacrificial mercy. In one person. The Christ. The anointed one. Sent to be our savior.

Sent to be our Lord. Lord over everything. Lord over Caesar. Lord over the Church. Lord over each of us. Lord over this sinful flesh that wars against the Spirit of God within us. Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Thanks be to God, Jesus Christ our Lord will deliver us. That one sentence tells us everything we need. Because in Paul's gratitude, he reminds us that this is not our fight to wage. That Christ did not suffer through the curse of sin and die for us in order that we might try to fight this war without him.

These brains belong to Jesus Christ our Lord. These hands and feet belong to Jesus Christ our Lord. And he has redeemed them. We may be frustrated by them. We may feel like wretched people living in bodies of death. But he loves us. Body and soul.

He loves these sinful bodies so much that he invites us at every Lord's Supper to make his body a part of our body. His blood a part of our blood. We may feel shame at the sin within us... and rightly so! But Christ is not ashamed of us. And he is not ashamed to be a part of us. Because his body and blood sanctifies us to be his own.

For just as he came to suffer the curse of a sinful body and die, even though there was no sin in him. So also he came to offer the blessing of a sinless body and live again. In his resurrection, Christ shows us that this war within us will end. That by the power and mercy of God almighty, we will find a life of peace. This body we live in will not always be a body of death. One day, it will be a body of life through him who loves us.

For that's the difference between the pax romana and Christ. Between Caesar and God. For Rome, peace could only ever come through continual war. But for us, the war ends when Christ returns. The chariot will be cut off. The battle bow shall be broken. As Christ once spoke light into darkness, so he will speak peace to the nations. And there will be peace. Peace between nations. Peace with God. Peace within our own hearts. Peace for all eternity. Amen.