

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Romans 12:9-12

Matthew 16:21-28

How good are you at breaking bad habits? I subscribe to the replacement theory of ridding oneself of bad habits. Don't look for it on the internet. I dreamed up the term yesterday but I'm pretty sure that the replacement theory is legit. In order to fully eliminate a bad habit one can't simply stop doing this or that, one has to fill the vacuum created by the absence of the unhappy behavior with something positive, something with an inherent reward. One of my favorite TV shows a few years back was *The Biggest Loser*. It was a show with a brilliant human element, maximum insight into people's struggles with their weight, their internal battles, how they address their habits and, most importantly, how they replace them. The participants demonstrated incredible humility, incredible determination; sometimes great success and sometimes not great success. I'm a bit of a cheerleader at heart. I almost always root for the underdog. I see a lot of joggers in my neighborhood, while driving. When the ripped athlete cruises by I barely notice. When I see the heavier individual putting in the hard miles I always say, out loud, in my car, completely by myself, "you go, bro; you go lady! Right on!"

The replacement theory of ridding oneself of bad habits is totally biblical. Jesus told the story of the unclean spirit who departed an individual. When the unclean spirit returned it saw the house put in order, swept and clean, but empty. The house was a metaphor for the person's soul. The trouble with the "now-in-order-house" is that it wasn't occupied. The evil spirit then goes and finds seven others, worse than itself, and they then become squatters in the person's soul so that the person's last state is worse than at the beginning (Matthew 12:43-45). Martin Luther understood this. His baptismal rite includes this line: "Depart O unclean spirit and make room for the Holy Spirit." We can't just eliminate evil from our lives. It is to be replaced with goodness.

Peter had a bad habit. Peter was hooked on bad religion. Like a junkie who shoots heroin, Peter had tracks, injection marks, evidence of a vice that was his go-to. Here's an example. Jesus was about to wash His disciples' feet. The Lord intended this as a lesson. His humility, His love, His service – that was the lesson. To joyfully, faithfully receive what He wills to give – that was the lesson. That we, after receiving what the Greatest offers to the least, we are to render that humility, that love, that service to others – that was the lesson. And Peter was hooked on bad religion. "You shall never wash my feet" (John 13:8). For Peter, the first shall be first. Peter had a bad habit, a bad theological habit, and he was hooked. Something had to replace it.

The world has its own religion. The sinful flesh has gobs of theological opinions, tons of spiritual principles that it holds to. The problem is that they are all false, all empty, all obfuscate the truth, taking people hostage. The world's religion is based on money, possessions, power, stature, personal gratification, pride, glamour and prioritizing the self. Being a creature of this world and having your own sinful nature, you are subject to the influence of this false religion. Like most junkies, Christians try to hide their tracks, hide their affinity for the world's religion. Here something entirely different from the world's religion: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Jesus said that. That

is Jesus' replacement theory for the bad religion that animates our culture. St. Paul wrote this 2000 years ago but, man, is it pertinent today. "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:8-10).

Peter's bad religion would have kept Jesus from the cross. Peter thought: God's Son shouldn't suffer. God's Son shouldn't be scorned. God's Son shouldn't die. The First should be first and Jesus was most certainly the First and Peter's bad religion habit led him to rebuke his Lord and Master. "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Matthew 16:22). Jesus knew where this bad religion came from and He was grieved that Peter had made it his habit. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matthew 16:23). Now, dear saints of Christ the King, fellow disciples of the Lord of glory, is there anything unclear about those words? Satan is the master, the progenitor, and the promoter of the world's empty religion. He is armed with death and hell and he is on the prowl, looking for someone to devour. His religion animates the heart of sinful man and we must be transformed.

I suspect that Peter took the rebuke hard. Did he have a sleepless night? Did he examine himself? Did he repent of that devilish habit, that worldly religion? It's amazing how much trouble we get ourselves into just because we don't listen. Jesus was clear with Peter and the others. He showed them that He *must* go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priest and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised (Matthew 16:21). He must! This was the path that the Father had charted and Jesus would not deviate from it in the least. In the OT, God had instructed Joshua in this way. Be strong and courageous. Be careful to do according the law that Moses gave you. Do not turn from it to the right or the left that you may have good success. Meditate on the Book of the Law day and night and I am with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:7-9). Jesus is divine embodiment of that Word of God. Absolutely nothing is going to force Him off the path God gave Him. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus is being arrested, Peter takes a sword and whacks off the ear of the servant of the high priest. As He healed the man's ear, Jesus said this to Peter: "Put your sword back into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (John 18:11).

Bad habits and the replacement theory; Peter needed to be transformed and that is precisely what happened. What triggered it? The night that Jesus was arrested, Peter denied that he even knew the Lord... three times. Bad religion didn't give him courage. What happened to Peter? We know that he became the stoutest of the stout, bold, selfless, a rock of fidelity, a rock of Christian virtue. What happened? Peter saw Jesus crucified. God's plan was realized and Peter saw it. Sacrifice, humility, love, courage – Jesus is nailed to a cross and bleeds for sinners, for all of us who love bad religion. Forgiveness flows from His wounds and His mouth. This sacrificial Lamb is the one who washed Peter's feet. This dying Savior said that He must be crucified, and rise the third day. As Jesus died, this Divine Son of God is drinking the cup that the Father had given Him to drink. Peter saw all of this and his bad habit was replaced. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (John 10:18).

What Peter previously heard with his ears, he saw with his eyes as Jesus hung on the cross. Peter raced to the tomb on Easter morning and saw it empty. Peter dove out of his fishing boat and swam to the risen King on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Peter was absolved and re-commissioned by Christ as a pastor that same day. Jesus is the One who replaces our sin with His holiness. Jesus is the One who replaces our bad religion with His grace, His truth, His life and His love. You and I are the beneficiaries of His ministry. It's ongoing. From darkness to light, from the emptiness of the world to the beauty of His church, from death to life – His ministry is ongoing and we are continually transformed. Our minds are renewed. We are not conformed to the pattern of this world. We are transformed by death and resurrection, by grace, and by His body and blood. Each of us is a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). Why is that? Because we deny ourselves, we pick up our crosses and we follow Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen King.