**Jenga for Sinners**

Psalm 145:8-14
Romans 7:15-25a

 The Apostle Paul may have never played the game Jenga, but he would understand how this game is played and how it works. If you are unfamiliar with Jenga, you begin the game by stacking 48 blocks into a tower. The game is played by sliding one block out from the pile and stacking it on top. Like the tower of Babel, the block tower gets higher and higher and higher. At the same time the tower gets less and less stable as blocks are carefully slid out from below and placed on the top. The contest is between two people and the winner is determined when one of the players pulls out a block that causes the entire tower to collapse. Initially the two players can approach the tower with confidence that they will be able to remove the one single block and put it on top with a reasonable feeling of success. But, as the tower grows, as the bottom becomes less secure, it is difficult to escape the awareness that sooner or later this Babel like tower will come crashing down as it always does.

 It is the inevitability of the crash, the collapse of the tower, which makes the game Jenga understandable to Paul. No matter how hard you try, no matter how careful you are. Eventually the tower is coming down. It is only a matter of time. Maybe you will be the one who is lucky and avoid direct responsibility for the tower’s collapse. But, the tower will collapse and you will have played a role.

 Although Paul may have never played Jenga, he knows what it is to try and build our towers higher and higher with the hope, maybe even expectation that it will never collapse and that somehow we can avoid this particular outcome. In his letter to the Romans, Paul is describing his frustration with 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, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Paul, in other words, recognizes that no matter how hard he tries, no matter how careful he is at building his tower, eventually, sooner or later, it will collapse. Carefully Paul has pulled out the blocks from the pile, always with the best intention, but then suddenly the whole things come crashing down around him. That is jenga and that is what Paul describes as human sin. If you play Jenga there is no escaping the reality the tower will collapse. If you are human, there is no escaping the reality and consequence of sin.

 It is important to note, as one Biblical commentator does, “Paul views sin not as breaking of a rule, but rather, as the distortion of relationship.” That is worth saying again. Sin is not the breaking of a rule, but the distortion of a relationship.” Paul recognizes and is quite frustrated by his awareness, that no matter how hard he tries, no matter how good his intentions, he is unable to escape the distortions in our human relationships that ultimately cause our towers to collapse.

 I grew up with an understanding that sin was largely about rules. We had quite a few. No dancing, no going to movies, no drinking. There were also bigger rules, like no lying, no cheating, no sex outside of marriage. The Ten Commandments were seen as part of the rule structure, no swearing or taking God’s name in vane, no coveting your neighbor’s stuff. These were all seen as rules focused on individual behavior.

 It is always a bit entertaining when we can focus our thoughts and energy on the individual sins of other people. That’s what made Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski so fascinating or Mark Sanford, the former governor of South Carolina who took off to see his Argentinean mistress while pretending he was hiking the Appalachian trail. Their Jenga towers come crashing down and we got to enjoy talking about what it was that made them think they could pull that particular block out and get away with it.

Paul tells us how frustrated he is with his own sinfulness and one approach we might take is to begin wondering just what those individual sins are that cause Paul so much grief. Maybe Paul was into gambling. Or maybe Paul like his wine a bit too much. There are those who speculate that Paul’s sexual orientation was an issue and like too many religious people was unable to accept his own sexuality, which he saw as sinful. Those are all interesting speculations, based on the notion that sin is about rules.

 But, if sin is about a distortion in human relationships, than the struggle Paul describes has nothing to do with rules, but rather Paul’s inability to escape the distortion of relationships that infect and impact everyone, including Paul. Sometimes the distortion in relationships happen in a more individual ways as when Paul lets his temper get the best of him, contributing to a break in relationship with Peter or Barnabas or others with whom Paul was at times in conflict.

But, Paul also knows that the distortion in human relationship that none of us can avoid are ones that are systemic. In his letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul says “for our\* struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”. Sin is about the distortion of relationships. As one who continually confronts the domination and exploitation manifest by the Roman Empire, Paul is fully aware that distortion of relationship is more than individual shortcomings. The sin we are unable to escape or avoid is also systemic. No matter how hard he tries Paul is unable to escape participating in the domination and exploitation of Rome.

 Yesterday Wayne Bjorlie emailed to me a story about US foreign Aid to El Salvador. The aid is intended to promote poverty alleviation and facilitate development growth in impoverished countries. Yet, because of pressure from US corporate agriculture interests the US is demanding that to get the aid El Salvador must purchase genetically modified seeds from companies like Monsanto instead of purchasing non-GMO seeds from local farmers. This “predatory aid” will have the exact opposite impact for El Salvador that the aid is intended to accomplish. The very same policy has been pursued in Haiti and elsewhere. It is this systemic nature of sin that causes Paul to say,

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

 Paul knows that like Jenga, this tower will collapse. He takes personal responsibility because Paul understands this is how change happens, this is where healing begins. We cease pretending the fault is with someone else. We own up to and tell the truth about the reality in our own lives and our world. No matter how many blocks we are able to pull out from the tower and stack on top, the tower will collapse. That is the nature of sin. The behavior of the US and Monsanto in their treatment of Salvadoran farmers comes as no surprise to Paul

 Yet, Paul knows another reality as well. Rather than grow cynical, give up, conclude there is nothing he can do about Rome, about Monsanto, about racism, climate change or those individual struggles that might be ours, Paul affirms what members of AA affirm every week. There is a higher power at work in our lives and in our world, a power stronger than Monsanto, greed, lies, individual pride, selfishness or any of the many manifestations of sin. Paul knows the reality of sin is unavoidable, but Paul also knows as the Psalmist says, “God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, God is good to all and God’s compassion is over all that God has made”. Whether the sin that troubles us has to do with our individual struggles or whether it is the systemic dimension of sin causing harm to our relationship with each other, with creation, with God, there is no sin that is stronger than the love of God at work in our world.

Once again, Paul has played the game of Jenga and once again, predictably, the tower has collapsed. Rhetorically Paul asks, “who will rescue me from this death?” And rhetorically Paul responds, “Thanks to be God through Jesus our Lord!”

**Psalm 145:8-14**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist confesses the failings, disappointments and shortcomings we experience and contribute to in life. Yet, rather than grow discouraged, the trust of the Psalmist is firmly placed in the love and compassion of God.*

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is good to all,
 and God's compassion is over all that God has made. All your works shall give thanks to you, O God, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your dominion, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your dominion. Your reign is an everlasting reign, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. God is faithful in every word, and gracious in every deed. God upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

**Romans 7:15-25a**

*In our second lesson the Apostle Paul honestly confesses his own personal struggle with human sinfulness. Yet, Paul’s confession is much more than an individual acknowledgement of his own shortcomings. Paul’s confessions is an acknowledgement that sin is an inescapable reality lives and in our world. For Paul, there is only one force more powerful than the destructive power of sin.* It *is a power Paul encounters in the love revealed in Christ.*

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. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!