

Sermon: *Transforming Daemons to Angels*

She was a leader among a small set of staff and faculty who served underprivileged, first-generation college students needing specialized mentoring and support – some coming from low-income working-class communities, some recent arrivals from China or the Near East, some just out of prison, others in need of remedial English in reading and writing skills.

Jean was her name. She was a P-K, a preacher's kid. Holding a master's degree, she held a tenured faculty position as a psychologist and counselor at a well-respected, San Francisco community college, and was chair of a Bay Area educational psychologists' organization.

Jean was on the committee that had hired me into my first college job to teach English – college reading, writing, literature, and, also, ethnic studies.

Because ours was both a collegial and family relationship renewed in visits, meetings, and walking conversations, I came to know much about Jean. I knew of the centrality of her father in her life, but absolutely nothing of her mother.

Jean struggled with depression. Nothing of what I knew **of** her or saw **about** her suggested the cause.

One day Jean made a request. Knowing that I was exploring graduate schools for a doctorate, she told me of her interest in applying for admission to the University of California, Santa

Barbara, for a doctorate in education. She asked if I might read her essay and offer a critique. I agreed.

A week or so later outside one of the college buildings where we worked, she gave me her essay to read. I went over a few yards away to read it under a shade tree. She remained on a bench just outside the building.

Unknown to me, Jean was studying me as I read the essay. Unprepared for what I read, my mouth fell-open. After reading, I pulled myself together. Walked over to Jean. She spoke first. Speaking softly... sadly, she said, “No need to say anything. Your face said it all.”

....I had not known...! Perhaps Jean was severely dyslexic. I have no idea to account for what I read. Here was an accomplished educator, public speaker, a gifted pianist, insightful thinker but a total train wreck of a writer! Indeed, my face had to have said it all! I was in total shock!

Jean went on to gain entrance to the doctoral program. While completing her degree, she discovered that she had a gift for statistics! On her return to the college, the vice-present gave her additional responsibilities as the college’s statistical analyst.

At some point in our friendship, Dr. Jean Du Bois, now some 30 years, long deceased, told me she **hated** herself. I knew she was depressed. But self-hate made no sense to me. Was the self-hate the cause or the **symptom** of something deeper?

Her life challenges – some of which I knew and much of which I did not know, would have been factors for her inner struggle leading to self-loathing. But I suspect it was something much deeper. But what that **was**~ totally escaped me!

Paul, too, dealt with an inner struggle. Described in the Romans, highlighted in today's passages, the letter has long been a puzzle to biblical scholars. There is no total getting at the bottom of it because of its complexity. Scholars differ in what the central message is, of whether it is Paul describing a common human condition or mainly a personal struggle or both.

Some scholars focus on the nature of Paul's inner struggle – the historically obvious, some focus on the hidden – discerned only through expert textual and cultural analysis along with inference making.

At the opening of the passages, Paul insists that, "*the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.*" The law is holy, but sin worked death in Paul through what is good. Sin is not just a series of personal peccadilloes, particular instances of failings to live up to some standard. It is not even the sum-total of all those failings.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition only intelligent, conscious beings are able to sin. They sin when they consciously, knowingly, choose evil over good. But Paul is saying that there are natural drives within us that can run counter to our willingness and choices. Drives that overpower and control us. These drives are at war within Paul.

Paul equates the wilful choosing of evil over good and the drives that overpower us, both, as sin. Also, misguided behavior that does evil, he names as sin. More, he sees sin as a kind of cosmic power – a spiritual energy outside of human control.

Paul speaks from experience. Elsewhere in his writing, Paul, a zealot Jew, references his persecution of the body of Christ – the stoning of the followers of Jesus under his supervision (See: Acts 8: 1-2 & 9:1-3). His virtuous but sinful behavior came **not** because he had failed to keep the law, but because he **kept** a law that sin~ had hijacked for its own purposes.

Here, he describes sin as an active, aggressive power that seizes hold of God's good gifts, like the law, and bends them down towards death. Death came not because Paul could not keep the law, but because **he could**, and **did**.

Sin deforms this world in ways that bend even ethical actions to death-dealing ends. For example, a law to support the sanctity of life is good. But sin can deform that law to take away human freedom to **choose**, to **discern**, and to **decision** in good faith what is the higher good.

A law to give parents a say in the education of their children, can be used to children's moral detriment, denying them a balanced and historically accurate account of their nation's past and their identity as connected to that past.

Sin is so powerful that it can wrench God's gifts into serving its own ends. Nonetheless, Paul is clear that sin is not an independent rival of God. Sin remains entirely within the scope

of God's saving work. Even sin's seizure of the law plays a role in redemption.

When sin seizes the law, it shows itself or what it is. It becomes evil beyond all measure. Paul is describing not simply an internal struggle, but a cosmic drama in which sin overplays its hand, reveals itself as sin, and collapses into the weight of that revelation.

We can begin to understand that cosmic drama by recalling the confrontation between nonviolent civil rights marchers and law enforcement officials on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama, on Sunday, March 7, 1965. ...When state and local lawmen clubbed peaceful marchers, a sinful power showed itself for what it was. Though sin seized the bridge on that day, it lost the luster and legitimacy it needed to survive as a social order.

Dealing with a cosmic force, referring to the way sin was working death in him, that sin dwells within him, acting as a force of its own, so that even though he does not agree, Paul finds himself **doing** what he does not agree with and **not doing** what he agrees with.

Paul may be seen to be saying what we would say about the workings of the shingles virus or of cancer. A shingles virus resides in the spinal column until it is activated by the stress of the law. Or, in the analogy, likened to a cancer that is not known to have metastasized until it is revealed by us CAT scan.

Sin is not just a behavioral aberration or something that Paul **does** or **does not** do. It actually resides in him, it is housed in

him, it is domiciled in him like a parasite living off its host. It will not stop being destructive, it will not cease killing the person it is in, until it is removed and replaced by something stronger – in Paul’s view, by the spirit of Christ.

Paul’s inner struggle and our internal struggles with the cosmic force of sin, and our seeking to work through the struggles, may also be likened to the process and trajectory described in the Alcoholics Anonymous twelve steps. Paul’s cry of dereliction is our human cry of bottoming out.

There, he and we, come to admit that we are powerless over these inner forces – dispositional, orientational, and addictive forces – or forces ancestral and innate to our particular nature and DNA, and **then** we come to believe that a greater power than ourselves is needed to enable us, support us, and sustain us in the struggle.

The struggle does not end! The battle between sin and righteousness continued in Paul’s life even after his conversion, as it does for Christians today. Paul could do nothing, God did everything for him, and all that was left for him to do was to give thanks.

Paul by nature will continue to be Paul. We by nature will continue to be who we are. The daemons may remain just outside the door. But he and we by acknowledging who and what we are, accepting our human frailty, our finitude, can be enabled to keep the daemons at bay through God’s redeeming grace.

Dr. Jean Du Bois not only managed her demons but in acknowledging them, transformed the demons to angels in the service of others. She managed and surmounted her poor writing skills and dyslexia by ensuring that others with reading, writing, and social disabilities succeeded in college course work, enabling them to be more wholesome and fulfilled humans.

May each of us commit ourselves to God, a kind and gracious God, trusting in God's mercy and grace to manage our demons, trusting victory over them in Christ. Let us ask for the Christ to work in and through us to bring all things unto good. Amen!