

Sunday, July 6, 2014: Romans 7:15-25a

## **We learn to be Christian not when we succeed at perfection but when we realize that we will always fail.**

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [June 25, 2014](#) issue

In my early twenties, I worked on an organic vegetable farm. We made lunch every day from the rejects—misshapen carrots, pockmarked zucchini, Swiss chard lacey with holes. Even most of the better vegetables had some blemish, insect damage, or discoloring. I began to understand that produce grown without pesticides, industrial fertilizers, or dyes tends to look kind of ugly. Produce at the grocery store began to look plastic to me—so shiny, clean, and perfect.

We live in a world without much decay. A professor of mine liked to say that until recently, human thought was deeply influenced by the fact that people did not have refrigerators. Food is extremely perishable. In ancient kitchens, meat, bread, and produce lasted only so long before they became disgusting and inedible. Human bodies were much the same. There were no antibiotics, no emergency rooms, and no dentists. People got scars and lesions; they lost fingers, toes, and teeth. They died from what we now consider minor infections and illnesses.

Could the body be considered good when it broke down so easily? Today, we may be shocked by Paul's words, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" or "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh." But we're protected from physical death and decay in a way that Paul and his neighbors were not. Unlike him, we are surrounded by images and examples of perfection.

I'm a recovering perfectionist. In my first few years of ministry, I agonized over details, losing sleep because I thought I'd said the wrong thing and despairing when a worship service, newsletter, or board meeting wasn't perfectly hospitable, clear, or efficient. Then I began to notice that perfection isn't very hospitable. And that I was exhausted all the time.

Perfection is all over the grocery store, but it's an impossible goal for human beings. As Paul says, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." His struggle to "do what is good" is defeated by his human sinfulness. Perfectionism is self-defeating in the same way.

Christians long to do good: to be responsible, to help those in need, to stay cheerful and positive. As clergy, a desire to do good can consume every thought and moment. We want to meet people's needs, to preach sermons that affect their lives, to help churches thrive as communities of action and prayer, to create a place where people can encounter the living God.

But Paul shows us that the true breakthrough in learning to be Christian—and, I would argue, in being a good pastor—comes not when we succeed at perfection but when we realize that we will always fail. We are equally sinner and saint, as Martin Luther reminds us. Paul calls out the sinner cowering inside us, afraid to be discovered and shamed. We're afraid that to show our imperfections means being thrown into the reject pile, like a carrot with three legs.

"I do not do the good I want," says Paul, "but the evil I do not want is what I do." He's like the leader of a first-century 12-step group, encouraging me to step into the light: "My name is Heidi, and I'm a sinner."

A friend of mine adapted the 12 steps specifically for "clergy recovery": "We admitted we were powerless over our church—that our lives had become unmanageable." "We came to believe that only God, a power greater than ourselves, could restore our congregation and us to sanity."

Another colleague once reminded me to "put Jesus at the center instead of yourself, and your congregation will thrive." It's not that clergy can't ever do good, or that we shouldn't strive to do better. It's that a church, in the end, is about knowing God and helping others know God. And knowing God also means knowing that we're not God.

I am, however, a 21st-century American, and it's hard to say with Paul that "nothing good dwells within me." Nothing good? I grew up with Mr. Rogers singing songs like, "You Did It!" and "It's You I Like." At the school science fair, we all won at least a green ribbon for participation. I hear people talk about getting in touch with "what I really want," not with how they "do not do what [they] want." *The Message* renders this verse as, "I realize that I don't have what it takes." That's a little easier to handle, although still a challenge to the belief that you can do anything you put your

mind to.

It's freeing, however, to declare that I don't have what it takes. It frees me to do what I can, instead of feeling like I have to do everything. It frees me to be myself instead of a perfect, plastic version of myself.

Don't let the grocery store fool you. Vegetables aren't supposed to be perfect, and neither are we. Decay remains inescapable. There is imperfection and sin in this life. And yet we can say with confidence in God's mercy, "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"