*Who Will Rescue Me?*

Romans 7:15-25; Matthew 11:28-29

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Last Friday we went to the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids. It was a beautiful day and none of us had been to that zoo before. We started out by eating something and then began the winding paths through the zoo. It was a nice zoo, well laid out, but Joe had some trouble walking with his hip still in the process of recovery. Fortunately it was not hot but there were some up and down paths and a few steps to maneuver. We were certainly enjoying ourselves and rested frequently. We did get to see the new tigers which had chosen to roam around in the outside of their habitat rather than inside. The animals were beautiful and powerful looking. We laughed as one of the ducks below the fox den watched warily as the fox roamed back and forth just above him. The fence held him securely and he had no chance to get the duck, but the duck didn’t know that. There were other wonders to behold on our journey through the zoo, but one thing especially stood out for me. Housed in an enclosed glass cage were a few smaller monkeys and clinging to one of the monkeys was a very young baby monkey. The baby was dangling precariously from the mother playing with the ends of frayed rope. I was not sure how secure the baby was but what happened next truly amazed me. An older sibling reached down and cradled the baby very tenderly in its arm and pulled it back to the mother so it would be more secure and not run the risk of falling. The act was so gentle that one would have believed there was a love between the older sibling and the baby. The tenderness of the whole thing held me captive. Here in nature was a prime example of how gentle those of the animal kingdom could be. The episode reflected my own impression of the gentleness of Jesus as he cares for people through the tough times of their lives.

For Paul, Jesus was the answer to a particularly troubling dilemma he faced when he thought about his faith. Paul knew that he ought to be able to do the right things, do the will of God when he chose to do that. But what he found himself doing at times was quite the opposite. He knew what the right thing was, but sometimes did just the opposite. He had tried to follow the law, the Torah all his life, but found himself doing just the opposite. So he comes to the conclusion that it was not that he was a bad person, but that sin was constantly a force within him that tried to exert itself and get him to do what he didn’t want to do. The more he tried to follow the law, the more he seemed not to follow it.

We too can find ourselves in Paul’s dilemma. We want to do what is right but occasionally we find ourselves doing just the opposite. None of us seem to be able to reach the perfect way of following God. We humans have a tendency to give into life’s little temptations and sometimes the big ones. We do not follow this God of ours perfectly. We wander off the path. We wonder how it is even possible to follow God perfectly when we are often doing the wrong thing. We too easily give in to the things we know are wrong for us and for others.

I know that if I stick to my diet, my blood sugars will be good and my health will improve, and I know I will have more energy. But you know, ice cream calls to me. A fudge brownie beckons enticingly. Anger controls my responses at times. I find it hard to love all people. I get mad at the driver that doesn’t put the turn signal on. I let the small things bother me. If reading familiar passages of the Bible is not convenient, I will shorten my devotional time by skipping over those parts. I cannot be a perfect follower of Jesus.

But that is why Jesus did what he did. God knew what we are like. He had given the law for his people to follow. He knew they did not follow it perfectly and often drifted away from it. He knew the people would not obey fully, even though the law was good and would help them live life successfully and righteously. God knew we would dangle precariously from our faith periodically. Jesus was the example for us to follow, real flesh and blood example of what it means to live a righteous life. Jesus had patience with his closest friends, those we call his disciples.

Peter practically swore to Jesus that he would never desert him, but what did he do? He denied ever having known Jesus after Jesus was arrested. Peter did exactly what he vowed he would never do. And what was Jesus’ response? He was gentle with Peter and later asked him three times, the same number Peter had denied him, if he loved him.

This gentle, patient Jesus is the one who cradles us back into God’s arms when we are hanging precariously on the edge of our faith. Jesus is the one who can get us back on the right path and keep sin from dominating our lives. This wise and knowing Jesus is the one who forgives us and moves us forward when we accept his forgiveness.

We don’t have to worry excessively about not being able to always do things right! The Spirit teaches us into right-er living. I think that is why the monkey scene had such an effect on me. It gave me an image to live with for a while, an image to think about God’s love and care for us, an image to bolster my sometimes flagging faith. I love the idea that Jesus reaches down and cradles me when I am hanging, ready to drop, ready to be unfaithful yet again. Jesus reaches down and pulls me back to the sure and certain arms of God and I am on the right path once again.