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Keating Series Part 5  
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The Rib Cage of Failure  
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A monk once told me that having practiced a life of meditation, he had a moment of self-awareness wherein he realized he had a general dislike of women. He also realized that it all traced back to a moment as a baby happily feeding at his mother's breast when he was plucked from her as she switched breasts. His anger at the disruption was the beginning of his dislike for women. I told this story to Lou and he said, "Whoa!" I wasn't sure what Lou's reaction meant—did he not believe such awareness was possible? He said, "No, it's not that. It's just that if I realized something like that, I wouldn't admit it."

Self-awareness is a fruit of the practice of divine silence. As we go deep into the silence with God, the old programming begins to dismantle and show themselves for what they are—illusions of safety and security, illusions of esteem and affection, illusions of power and control. We can see that the afflictive feelings we had led to afflictive commentaries. For this monk, the afflictive feeling of anger at not getting his food as a baby led to a series of commentaries, accretions growing like an ingrown toenail—resulting with a conclusion that women were not to be trusted.

The ingrown illusions are built on a "monumental illusion", as Thomas Keating calls it, that we are separate from God and need to then figure out other ways of finding satisfaction. In essence, we become our own god by playing out our value system for the world that we expect everyone to obey. For our monk, when he was a baby, the process could have been like this: food (safe), disruption (fear), change (bad), woman (not safe), woman (not

trustworthy), women should satisfy my needs (afflictive commentary), stay away from women (safe).

Once our monk came to this awareness, he said he had an existential crisis; he saw himself clearly and it didn't look pretty. He had to fall onto the mercy of God to heal him of his crooked view of women. He could have cried out, like the Apostle Paul, "Who will save me from this body of sin? Thanks be to Jesus Christ! For there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus." For God is the only one who can heal us of this body of sin.

This is the fifth sermon in the Thomas Keating series. Today, I will discuss Paul's letter to the Romans with Keating's framework and, so hopefully understand how both men's teachings lead us to freedom and transformation.

The Letter to the Romans can be a mystery to decipher. One of the reasons is that Paul uses the same word to mean different things, and with translation across culture and time, the mystery deepens. For example, Paul uses the word "law" in several ways. As I understand it, he talks about three types of law:

1. The law of sin
2. The Law—the Torah
3. The law of the Spirit

The law of sin describes a way of being/doing that has happened since we were born, even before we were born. This has been called Original Sin. But Paul's letter doesn't describe this the way the medievalists did, tracing its origins through the sperm of Adam. Rather, Paul seems to be describing the human condition as the law of sin. As we heard last week, he laments this condition: "I do the thing I do not want to do and I do not do the thing I want to do."

I believe Keating's teachings on our programs for happiness explains well how the law of sin came to be and how it operates: it started from the

moment we started to seek after safety and security, esteem and affection, power and control in our cultural symbols. The strivings become programs. The programs act like laws—they run on their own, often without our awareness or active participation. It is helpful to think about “law” here, not as a legal law, but something like the “laws of thermodynamics”. It is a condition of the universe. No one ever gives entropy a speeding ticket.

I want to define sin from the view of the contemplative. Sin is the grasping for anything that leads us away from the love of God, to fulfill our needs apart from God. When this manner of life becomes a habit of life, we can think our programming, with all its feelings and commentaries, is who we are. This is what Keating calls the false self. I believe Paul’s language for it is the “flesh”, though he also uses the word flesh in a few different ways.

Paul says that while we were in this law of sin (human condition), we gave ourselves over to the desires of flesh (false self). It is in this situation that God gave the Law, which is the second use of the word “law” by Paul. The Law here is the Torah, the first five books of the bible. Anyone who has read the Torah understands that legal laws are a small portion of its contents. A lot of what’s in there are stories. Another word to translate Torah is “instruction”—many of the instructions are on how to build community, exist in community and welcome the stranger and how to relate to God. Paul believes that this Law, the Torah, was given to waken the flesh (false self) to its state of sin (programs for happiness). The Torah, rather than being a list of do’s and don’ts, primarily functions to show us that there’s really no way to do all the good we want to do because we keep doing the bad we don’t want to do. It is our failure that is of value here.

Martin Laird, another wonderful teacher of contemplation, says that we can be unburdened by our exacting standard on ourselves and on others, if we let failure breathe us. Our intentions to change cannot overcome our programming; rather, it is our practice of consent to the divine action of healing within that does. Laird suggests this: Imagine failure, like a rib cage, breathing us so that we begin to notice we are breathing God and

God is breathing us. In this breathing, we release our afflictive emotions and thoughts over a long time, and we will find our programs revised by God. This breath is the Law of the Spirit.

The Law of the Spirit, which can be described as the Way of the Spirit, is the practice of surrender, exemplified by our Lord Jesus. Jesus took our temptations, trials and suffering (as Paul says, “the likeness of sinful flesh”) and showed us the way to die to the programs that hold us captive. The way to freedom is the surrender of these programs into God’s love and healing—to say yes to grace. “Whoever loves their life (false self) must lose it; whoever loses their life (false self) for my sake will find it (life in God).”

There is much fruit in the Way of the Spirit, the Law of the Spirit. One such fruit is self-awareness. While wonderful, it isn’t the goal. The goal is to surrender everything, including the fruit we bear, to life with God, which is healing, wholeness and freedom.