O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection. *Amen.*

So, that is a doozy of a prayer, this collect of the day just took care of pretty much everything. That prayer that began our liturgy today takes what Jesus summarized from the ten commandments into these two commandments and declared that on these hang all the law and the prophets, and then in today’s Gospel reading Jesus has the veritable audacity to add at the end of the readings today, “to take up my yoke the burden is light”.. How is that light?    Ha ha ha ha, very funny Jesus… [Koa, are you up for this?]

And thus, this is our conviction, in so many ways— to love God and neighbor and so keep the commandments and to be devoted to God, because of the grace of God’s Holy Spirit, but rather than being overwhelming, I think it very much depends on how we look at it.

The reading today from Paul’s letter to the Romans shows Paul throwing humself at the mercy of God’s grace, amid his struggle to do what is right. This passage really sounds like a confession of sin.  One can almost hear the similarities between Paul and a participant in an alcoholic annoynmous meeting. “Hi, I’m Paul, and I’m an alcoholic.” And Paul can then turn to a higher power, because Paul can’t solve the problem himself. Paul loves God and neighbor and needs grace of the Holy Spirit available through Christ.  And as simple and perhaps worn as that sounds, it is so very very true— not necessarily that Paul was an alcoholic, but that Paul, like each of us is a sinner, and there is no way around sin getting in the way, except with the help of God, through Jesus Christ.

That is but one way to think of this passage from Romans, but when you think about what all we know about Paul, this way of thinking may not actually square with Paul. You may perhaps remember in other places Paul’s boasting, Paul kind of likes to boast.  Essentially he sounds like this, “I was the best Pharisee around. and if you want to talk about keeping kosher, and how about my Jewishness, circumcised on the 8th day, did everything I was supposed to… etc.” So why do we hear Paul throwing himself on God’s grace in Christ now?

I think there are at least two other ways we can look at this portion of the letter—-when Paul says “I,” it may be a rhetorical turn— a substitution for all of humankind. Goodness knows we have been there: desiring to do good, and not able to do it; wanting to avoid what does harm, and sliding into it anyway. We have each been in that place at one time or another. About the only time we are not is when we are as young as Koa and we are not even up to learning what is good and bad.

The other way we could look at Paul’s claim is that Paul is speaking of his behavior before his conversion. Before the conversion, he really did believe that he was doing the right thing by rounding up and locking up Christians. We, as humans, like Paul, are so very blind when we tenaciously hold to a concept that whatever we believe is right, and since we are doing whatever that is, God must find it right as well. All that actually makes us is just rather arrogant. We are thinking for God, and that is rarely a good idea.

And this is the same issue that Jesus speaks to in the Gospel as well. No one likes to be called out for being wrong. Although wrong, the natural response when that happens is rarely to realize that you are wrong, but instead to find fault with the ones who are calling you out. People assume that what they are doing is right and therefore what they are doing must be from God. They assume that what John the Baptist and Jesus are doing is wrong, and so call them out for what they see as their “sins.”  They critizice John the Baptist because he was not eating or drinking, so they said he was a demon.  They criticed Jesus, the Son of Man for eating and drinking and keeping company with tax collectors and sinners.  Again, it matters not what humankind thinks, but instead, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” which is much the same as knowing something is from God by the fruit of the Spirit.

Basically without the grace of God, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we, as humankind, have a remarkable ability to see what we are doing as right and God-given and then can’t see what God actually is doing in the world. This is a particular sin, but God is forever calling us out of this, forever inviting us to see God at work in the world. Since God is calling us, doing the heavy lifting as it were, this is indeed light work. And it is liberating to us, in ways that often surprise. THAT is what it means to say that this burden of following Jesus is “light.”

And perhaps that may be part of what baptism entails…, everyone has the possibility of having parents and other significant adult figures to help steer him or her to what is right and wrong, but not anyone has Christ on his or her side. It is God who makes the invitation into our lives, all the time; it is God who showers grace upon us, even as we sometimes confuse our own desires with God’s purpose; and even particularly at baptism, God calls us and then gives us the light work of furthering the kingdom.