

Romans 6:12-23 Pastor Bill Uetracht 6/26/11 2 Pentecost

Soon we will be celebrating our nation's big day: the Fourth of July. We call it Independence Day because it recalls the time when we were set free from the control of the British Empire. But I suspect that the name "Independence Day" is more than a recollection of the past. It reflects at what is at the heart and soul of the American experiment: independence, freedom. We Americans value freedom. It's what makes us us, we claim. We stand for freedom. We promote freedom. We want to maximize freedom.

I think the Apostle Paul, one of the Bible's major contributors, would, on the one hand, appreciate our emphasis on freedom. After all, in one of his letters, the letter to the Galatians, he says that "for freedom Christ has set us free." The work of Christ, he claims, is a work that frees people. Paul was especially concerned with some Christian Jews who were claiming at the time of his ministry that new Christians needed to become Jewish first before they could become Christian. In other words, they needed to follow the Jewish law, become circumcised. Paul believed that this expectation was contrary to the Spirit of Jesus and contrary to the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. For Paul, there is freedom in Jesus, freedom from the gottas, the shoulds, and the oughts. For Paul, salvation is a gift from God's grace received through faith. For him, there aren't hoops that we must jump through. For freedom, he says, Christ has set us free.

So I think Paul would, on the one hand, appreciate the American emphasis on freedom. Yet on the other hand, I think he might find our preoccupation with freedom a bit unsettling. Increasingly, you and I live among a people who think that freedom means that we should be

able to do just about whatever we want to do when we want to do it. Freedom is seen by some as license, as permission to do what we individually feel we should be able to do. I am not sure Paul would see freedom in that way.

And what's more, I think he might look with suspicion upon our culture's definition of freedom as a matter of consumer choice. We in this country thrive on having the freedom to choose among 125 brands and styles of toothpaste. Having such a choice, we think is freedom. I have even heard people say that the wars that we as a nation fight are entered into so that you and I might be able to buy what we want to. A country song whose tune I really like suggests that the men and women we put in wars are sent to these wars so that we might have our chicken fries. Freedom, we seem to suggest, is about consumption and our choices for such consumption.

I think Paul couldn't relate. And I suspect that he might want to take us to a deeper place, a place that views freedom in a much more nuanced way. In today's second lesson from Romans, Paul seems to suggest that our ideas about freedom may be in some ways an illusion. He speaks of his readers as being slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. We all are one or the other, he seems to be suggesting. Maybe we are not as free as we think. We go around touting our freedom: we are free! But really how free are we? It's amazing to me that in a culture like ours that highlights freedom we suffer from some of the highest rates of addiction in the world. We provide people what appears to be maximum freedom, and yet so many of us are entangled. Wow the freedom that modern technology brings our society! Where we can go and what we can do because of it! Ask Representative Weiner what we can do! Maybe we are not as free as we think.

Paul seems to believe that we will be enslaved to one thing or another. We can be entangled by sin, or we can be entangled by righteousness. And he wants us to be entangled by righteousness. For him, entanglement with sin brings death. And let's face it. He is so right. Our entanglements with sin don't produce great results, do they? As Paul says, "What advantage did you then get from the things of which you are now ashamed?" Sin acts like a snowball going down a hill. It grows and grows and grows. And soon, life is out of control. I am sure that Representative Weiner didn't think that his actions would lead to the mess that they did. It wasn't his plan. But that's what the slavery to sin brings. It brings death. Entanglement with righteousness brings growth--Paul calls it, "sanctification." Being enslaved to the things of God brings renewal to us, growth in our relationships.

So first--we aren't as free as we think. We will be enslaved to one thing or another. Paul is taking on one of our cherished American views. And secondly, I think in Romans he, too, is taking on the notion that freedom means that we can do whatever we want whenever we want to do it. "Should we sin," he asks, "because we are not under law but under grace?" Since we live in light of the love freely given by God, should we then live with total abandon, unconcerned about what our actions do to others, to ourselves, to the earth? By no means, Paul says! God's free grace is not an invitation into license. It is not an invitation into sin. If it were, it would be an invitation into a new entanglement. Doing whatever you darn well please too often is not freedom, but slavery. It is slavery to yourself, your own wishes, your own desires. "Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies," Paul says, "to make you obey your passions." In other words, don't become enslaved by you!

Freedom for Paul is not a matter of doing your own thing. Yes, he believes that we have been set free by the love that has been poured out on us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yes, we are freed from having to jump through hoops; we are freed from having to prove ourselves, justify ourselves, make ourselves worthwhile. We are made worthwhile through the gift of God. Our baptisms mean that we are loved. Period! There's no having to earn the love. But the freedom that this love brings is given not so that we can get lost in another slavery—slavery to ourselves. It is given so that we might love. God's love is poured into and on us so that we might live within the freedom of love. And love is not a matter of doing whatever you darn well please whenever you darn well want to. Love has a structure. Love involves responsibility. Love entails commitment. Love centers in on the well being of the other.

Note what Jesus in our gospel lesson says love looks like, what lives that live out of love embody. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes someone who comes as a messenger for a prophet will receive the prophet's reward. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who comes representing a disciple will not lose their reward." Love looks like hospitality, not just to the big wigs, but to the people who are sent on their behalf. Love looks like hospitality not just to the pastor but to the folks who are not known, the folks who haven't established a position for themselves.

Love looks like welcome to the other. Love has to do with how we receive the other. We have been set free not so that we might walk all over people, neglect our commitments to our families, our churches, our communities. Too many people are suffering, too many churches

and communities are suffering because too many of us think that freedom means just doing whatever we as individuals and families want. The freedom that is our gift is the freedom to love, to welcome the other, to serve the other, to build the other up. That kind of freedom brings growth. This is the freedom that Paul calls the slavery to righteousness. This is a freedom that will bring life out of where there once was death. Get entangled with that kind of freedom!