

“True Freedom” Luke 8:26-39

June 27, 2010

5th Sunday After Pentecost

Next week, our country will once again celebrate Independence Day. There will be a lot of talk about freedom. But one wonders if many people today really understand what freedom means. For many, freedom simply means getting to do whatever I want to make myself happy. But do you think that *this* is what our founding fathers fought to get and what many since then have died to protect? The right to do my own thing? I don't think so.

Our forefathers fought to be independent from tyranny and oppression and “to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another” government. They desired freedom, not so that every individual could do whatever they wanted, but that they might join together in a noble and unheard of experiment: a “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. This freedom to be independent for the common good is reflected in the preamble to the United States Constitution:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Our epistle lesson for today talks about “freedom.” Just like we consider our freedom as Americans this coming week, we also consider our freedom as Christians. It begs the questions. *From* what have we been set free and *for* what have been set free?

As Americans who have enjoyed freedom for over 200 years, we are not used to thinking of ourselves as needing to be set free. We are not slaves, we think, but free people. While that may be true politically, it is not true spiritually. We live under a most harsh tyrant: the perfect Law of a perfect God. It sets for us a most impossible standard: perpetual perfection. In other words, God requires that you be perfect and that you be that way every minute of your life. The Law of God is relentless in its demands. You must never ever do anything that is wrong. You must always do what

is right. And, if that were not enough, the Law of God also requires that your words and even your very thoughts be perfect and without any wrong.

Thus, we become slaves to sin. We might think such an evaluation is a bit extreme. We'd like to think that, despite the tyranny of the Law, we are still in control and can still make right choices. When the Jews in Jesus' day proudly denied that they needed to be set free because they were not slaves to anyone, "Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (John 8:34) In other words, sin controls us from start to finish.

Don't you find that to be true in your life? Sin simply takes over. You freely and deliberately choose to live contrary to the Law of God. You may try to ignore the Law of God or, as many people do, reinterpret the Law of God so that your behavior becomes acceptable, but that changes nothing, especially in the sight of God. Even when you try to rebel against sin and do what is right, you can't do it very long or very well. Every good action is tainted by sin. As the prophet Isaiah says, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;" (Isaiah 64:6)

Slavery of any kind brings with it only hopelessness and despair. Recall the African-American slaves in the Deep South of the United States during the 19th Century. Because of their tyrannical masters over them and the state of slavery in which they lived, the slaves literally had no hope. Death was about the best thing they could look forward to.

We are the same. We live under the tyranny of the Law which requires that which we are unable to produce. As a result, we become slaves to sin, that is, because of our sinful nature, we are literally unable to refrain from sinning. Sin controls our thoughts, words, and deeds. We don't even have death to look forward to as a release. Scripture informs us that death is the final and eternal punishment for our sin.

But our text for today says that Christ has set us free. And He has done it in a most unusual way. Jesus set us free from being slaves by becoming a slave Himself. St. Paul writes to the Philippians, "[Christ], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be

grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus did not remain on His lofty throne in heaven as the ruler of the universe as we struggled in our slavery. Rather, he voluntarily put aside His power and His glory. He became a human being. He took on the very nature of a servant (or, more literally, “a slave”). He humbled Himself in that He placed Himself under His own Law and became obedient to it. He did that not just to say, “I told you that it could be done”, nor as an example or guide of how you can obey the Law yourself. Rather, Jesus obeyed the Law of God for you and in your place. He fulfilled the requirements of the Law perfectly.

Jesus was obedient to death – even death on a cross. He died on the cross not simply to show God’s great love or as a martyr for a cause. Rather, Jesus died on the cross for you and in your place. He took upon Himself your sins and the sins of the world and endured the judgment against and punishment for all of those sins.

This means you are free – truly free! You are free from the tyranny of the Law. It no longer controls you or rules you because it has been perfectly and completely fulfilled by Jesus Christ for you. His obedience is credited to you as holiness in your account before God.

You are free from the slavery of sin. It no longer threatens you with death and hell because all of your sins – the evil which you have done and the good which you haven’t done in thought, word, or deed – have been perfectly and completely forgiven by the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. His suffering and death is credited to you as forgiveness in your account before God.

This is great news, but it also presents us with a challenge. How do we live lives of freedom? This may seem like a stupid question but it is a very important one. When African-American slaves were emancipated by President Lincoln in the 19th century, it seemed like a great

thing. But it proved to be a difficult thing for many slaves because they had always been slaves.

They didn't know how to live as freed men and freed women.

As Christians, we may face the same challenge. The Law has so tyrannized us and we have been such slaves to sin that we don't know how to live as freed people. There are two wrong ways that we can use our freedom. One way is to slip back into the thinking that the Law is the basis for our relationship with God. We think that, even though Jesus has done all that He has done to earn our forgiveness and salvation, something is required of us – a decision, perhaps – to begin that a relationship with him or good behavior to maintain that relationship.

But our text says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." We are free! We need not and should not ever submit to the tyranny of the Law. Jesus has freed us from that yoke of slavery.

The other wrong way we can use our freedom is as an excuse to sin. Our text says, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh." This is a great temptation for us, as Lutherans. We think that, because Jesus has done everything for us to earn forgiveness for our sins and salvation for our souls, we can do whatever we want. It doesn't matter what we do because God loves us just the way we are and will forgive us anyway.

This is a horribly wrong way of understanding our freedom. We are not free to engage the desires of the flesh for they are diametrically opposed to the Spirit. Our text says, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these." Many self-professed Christians engage in this behavior and claim it is all right because of our freedom in the Gospel.

But Paul has a very serious warning for Christians who want to sin with impunity and think they can get away with it. He says, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Our freedom in the Gospel is very different. It is not freedom to do our own thing to make ourselves happy. Christ has freed us to be able to serve our neighbor. As our text says, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In other words, in a marvelous paradox, we have been freed in order to become slaves – only it is not slaves to our sinful flesh to serve ourselves, but slaves to our neighbors to serve them. Martin Luther put it this way: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

We are free from having to produce the requirements of the Law. Christ has done that for us. We are free from the condemnation of the Law. Christ has endured those for us. We are free from worry. We are free from fear. We are simply free to fulfill the intent of the Law – love – by serving one another and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

The Holy Spirit, who dwells in each of us since our baptisms, is the one who produces that kind of love which results in that kind of service. We live by the Spirit – that is, we have our life and relationship with God by the Holy Spirit who has called us by the Gospel. We are led by the Spirit – that is, we know the will of God through the Law of God which we have in the Holy Scriptures. And we walk by the Spirit – that is, we have the power of the Holy Spirit given to us God's Word and Sacraments to love one another and serve one another.

The presence, leading, and power of the Spirit implanted in our hearts produces fruit. Paul says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." That fruit of the Spirit will allow us to truly serve one another in love.

While next Sunday might be Independence Day for the citizens of the United States, every Sunday is Independence Day for the Christian Church. Every Sunday, we come here to commune with the risen and living Lord Jesus Christ through His Word, through Holy Absolution, and His

Supper. Every Sunday, we are freed from the tyranny of the Law. We are freed from sin, death and hell. Every Sunday, we leave here freed to love our neighbors and to serve one another in love.

What a great reason to celebrate! We are truly free! Amen.