

"Free To Be Slaves"
Romans 6:12-23

June 25, 2017

3rd Sunday After Pentecost

Slavery, especially our American experience with it in the 19th century, is an ugly institution. Even the word itself – slavery – is repugnant. The idea that one human being could own another human being and that such an owner of human flesh could force that slave to work and perform duties against his free will is not only un-American but inhuman. But suppose I told you that according to the Word of God, you are a slave, what would you think? And, what's more, suppose I told you that you were not forced to be a slave but that you were a slave by choice and willingly (and not by force) did the work that your owner required? At the very least, you might think, with all due respect, that your pastor was nuts. Yet this teaching about slavery is precisely what St. Paul communicates to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in our text for today. Basically, what he is saying is that everyone is a slave to someone or something. The important question is: who is your master and how does that affect your behavior?

Once, when Jesus was talking to Jews who had believed in Him, He talked about becoming free. The Jews proudly proclaimed, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Now, forgetting for a moment that the Jews had been slaves in Egypt for centuries and, at the present times, had been under the dominion of Rome for decades, they still were slaves. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

This applies as much to us today as it did to the Jews as Jesus' time. By the word of Jesus, you, I, and all who sin are slaves – slaves to sin. When we are born into this world, sin owns us. It is our master and we are its willing slaves. As we live here on earth, we do sin. The amazing thing is that our master doesn't have to force us to do this. We all willingly and purposely do the evil God forbids in the 10 Commandments. We also willfully, and with great apathy and ignorance, fail to do the good which God requires in those same commandments. If you think the slavery analogy is a bit much, then prove it wrong: stop sinning. You will find that, like any slave, you will not be able to rebel against your master – sin – and stop doing what it requires. You remain under sin's control.

Like any slave, we suffer under our cruel master. Sin leads to unrighteous behavior. Unrighteous behavior leads to God's righteous condemnation of us for our sin. We have no defense, no justification, and no excuse. We stand condemned by God. That condemnation leads to death. In fact, Paul says in our text that death is our wage - our reward – for sinning. And death leads us to hell and eternal punishment.

We cannot free ourselves from our slavery to sin. We are powerless to do so. But Jesus has the power to do so and He came to set us free. There are two ways for slaves to stop being slaves. First, a slave is no longer a slave if someone purchases him/her and pays the price to let him/her go free. Second, a slave is no longer a slave if he/she dies. Death releases people from slavery. Jesus came to effect both solutions.

First, we are no longer slaves to sin because Jesus has redeemed us. That means He paid the price to free us from slavery. We couldn't pay. The price was too high, more than all the wealth in the world. But Jesus loved you enough to do it. The catechism, echoing Peter's first letter, said, "He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death." When He was about to die, he shouted, "It is finished." The price was paid. God the Father accepted the payment three days later when He raised Jesus from the dead. The slaves were freed: freed from sin; freed from the condemnation of sin; and freed from the punishment for sin.

Second, we are no longer slaves to sin because we have died. In baptism, we have died to sin. We were baptized (that is, connected) to Jesus' death and burial. Since we are spiritually "dead and buried" in Christ, sin has lost its dominion over us. As in physical life, when a slave died, he/she is no longer a slave to his/her earthly master, so in spiritual life, when a person dies in baptism, he/she is no longer a slave to sin. We have been baptized into the new life of Christ's resurrection.

You may be thinking, "Now, just wait a minute. You said, we are freed from slavery, yet, in the beginning, you said that we are slaves now. The Bible says that we didn't choose to be slaves to sin. We inherited it from Adam. The Bible also says that we can't choose to be freed from slavery. It is by God's grace – His undeserved love. Yet you said at the beginning that we choose to become slaves. I'm confused. What gives?"

The answer is simple. You did not choose to free yourself from sin or be redeemed by Christ. That could never be. Sin prevents you from being free to do those things. However, once you ARE a child of God by grace, through faith, you have immense freedom to choose many things. That is the question that Paul addresses in our text. This is NOT a text for unbelievers about how to become free. This is a text for believers about how to use their freedom, proclaimed in the Word of God and acquired in Holy Baptism, in living their lives.

Many people believe that we have been set free so that we may do whatever we want. We are not bound by rules and regulations any more, even God's, and free to do anything. When people in Luther's time claimed they did not have to gather for public worship on the Lord's Day or receive the Sacrament because they were free in Christ not to, Luther replied in disgust, "They might as well say they are free to not be Christians." Freedom in Christ is not license to sin.

Other people, including many died in the wool Lutherans, believe that we have been set free to do nothing. They think, "We have been saved by grace alone. Christ did all the works to save us. We could do nothing. Therefore, we don't have to do anything." One author called this the "God-does-it-all-so-I-can-be-lazy" attitude toward sanctified (holy) living. (Middendorf, p.510) The first thing to remember is that ever. Paul not only uses indicative verbs which state what is done, but also imperatives verbs which command what should be done. Freedom in Christ is not permission to do nothing.

The freedom we have in Christ as baptized children of God is the freedom to choose who our master will be. This is a bit different than the way slave/master relationships normally work. Normally, a person is placed under a master as a slave and that will determine what the slave will and will not do. In Paul's analogy, this concept is flipped around. For Paul, it is the person's behavior which determines who his/her master will be and to what he/she will be a slave.

To those of you who think you can sin deliberately and without consequence because we live under grace and not under the Law, Paul warns against most strenuously. By intentionally or apathetically sinning, thus as Paul puts it, offering one's bodily members as instruments for unrighteousness, you are letting sin reign once again in your mortal body. Sin will once again become your master and you the slave to it. Although such behavior may not seem like slavery and may bring you pleasure, make things more convenient for you, or help you fit in with our anti-Christian culture and godless society, do not be deceived. This is the way that leads to death – and not only death and the grave, but death and hell.

Sin may seem to be an irresistible force and a mighty master. But Paul says this need not be the case. Paul says to you and to me, along with the Roman Christians, "You have been set free from sin." Sin no longer has dominion over you – that is, to frighten you or make you guilty – we are not under law but under grace. Because of God's grace to us in Christ, the law can no longer condemn and punish us. Rather, God's grace forgives us and declares us to be right with Him.

Therefore, let Christ's righteousness rule in your mortal bodies. Deliberately, eagerly, and joyfully do what God has declared to be good and right, or, as Paul puts it, offering one's bodily members as instruments for righteousness. In doing so, Paul says, "You have become slaves of God." He is a kind and loving master in contrast to the harsh and hateful master which sin is. He is a master we delight in serving. Being a slave of God and offering ourselves as instruments of righteousness leads to obedient and God-pleasing living (i.e. sanctification) now on earth and its end, eternal life in heaven.

You might have thought the title of today's sermon to be contradictory – an oxymoron like jumbo shrimp or military intelligence. But it's really not. We have been freed totally by God's grace, for Christ's sake, by virtue of the redemption paid on the cross in the perfect life of Jesus. And we will be slaves. The question will be: who will be our master? Will we use our freedom in Christ to choose sin and become slaves of sin which leads to unrighteousness and death? Or, will we use our freedom in Christ to choose that which is right and good and become slaves of God which leads to righteousness and life? The right choice seems obvious. May God the Holy Spirit, by His Word and and Sacrament, enable you to desire the right choice and empower you to fulfill the right choice! By His grace be freed to be His slave. Amen