

"Truly Free"
Romans 7:14-25a

July 3, 2011

3rd Sunday After Pentecost

Independence Day celebrates the freedom we have as Americans. Although we may take this freedom for granted, history tells us that it was not something which was easily obtained.

This country was composed of thirteen colonies which were under the rule and control of England. Some colonists supported England because they were, by nature, English and wanted to stay that way.

For those who considered themselves to be Americans, it was a great struggle. Their freedoms were limited. They couldn't always do what they wanted to do because they were not free people. The things which they hated – paying taxes without representation, submitting to the decisions of a foreign ruler, and so on – these are the things they kept on doing.

They felt trapped. What could be done to resolve the situation? You know the rest of the story. They dissolved the political bands which had connected them to England. They went off to fight a war of independence with England. And they won! The enemy was defeated. They were now truly free.

But what did that mean? Does that mean they gave up the struggle to do what was right and avoid what was wrong simply because they were now free? Perhaps that's what is wrong in our country today: people think freedom means license to do anything and everything they want to do. The first Americans, mindful of the price paid to obtain freedom, used their freedom responsibly: to do the good needed to build their new country and serve its citizens while avoiding that which would harm it.

This history of our Independence Day can serve as a parable for another kind of "independence day" – the independence day which we have as Christians. Like the colonists, we all live under the rule and control of a foreign power: sin. Many are content to simply go along with the

rule and control of sin in their lives. It doesn't bother them because they are, by nature, sinful. Apart from God, they remain that way.

We, too, were sinful by nature. However, by our baptism, we were born anew as Christians. Yet we are still under the control and rule of sin as Paul writes in our text, "We know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin." Like the colonists who considered themselves Americans and resisted the control of the British, we resist the control of sin in our lives.

But we can't seem to do it. While much of American Christianity will tell you about living the victorious Christian life in which sin is conquered and true Christians can lead godly lives, Paul paints a very different picture of himself which describes us. He writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Have you ever shared that frustration? You want to live a godly life. You want to obey God and do as He commands. It's not a matter of a lack of information. You know the Commandments of God as a well catechized Christian. But you don't do it, time and time again. You hate sin and want to avoid it. You know the prohibitions of God's Word. You don't want to do those evil things. Yet you keep on doing them.

This can lead to great despair. You may feel as if you are a slave to sin. And that's true. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (John 8:34) If you were really free and really loved God, why wouldn't you obey Him? If you totally trusted God, why wouldn't you avoid sin? Some may question whether you are a "real" Christian. You may even begin to wonder if you are a Christian at all.

However, I would submit that this conflict, far from showing that you are not a Christian, actually shows you *are* a Christian. Paul says, "Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good." In other words, if you are conflicted over your behavior – wanting to obey the law and not wanting to disobey, that is a sign of the Spirit's work within. A non-Christian wouldn't even care about obeying the Law of God. A non-Christian often delights in disobeying the Law of God.

The problem is as Paul states, “For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” As Christians, we have the desire to obey, but not the ability to obey. He also says, “So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” The problem is the sin that is within.

Does this get us off the hook with God? Not at all! These are not excuses, but explanations. Our sinful nature controls us from the inside. We desire our actions to be good and to avoid sin, but we are unable to carry them out because sin prevents us. So what do we do?

Rather than trust ourselves and our ability to improve, we trust the One who wanted to do the right and did it completely and hated the evil and avoided it entirely: Jesus Christ. And he did all of that - performing the good and avoiding the evil - for us and in our place. As Paul writes earlier in the book of Romans in comparing the sin of Adam with the perfect righteousness of Jesus, “Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:18-19)

As far as engaging in evil, the writer to the Hebrews says this of Jesus: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” (Heb. 4:15) In this way, Jesus was able to offer the perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world. Despite your willful and persistent sin, Jesus has taken that sin to the cross so that you might have forgiveness. Despite your failure to obey the Law of God again and again, Jesus has given you His own holiness to cover you so that you might stand before God.

The benefits of these transactions are tremendous. We have peace with God. As Paul writes earlier in Romans, “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our

Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 5:1) We are safe from the coming of God’s wrath against sin and have been reconciled with God – brought into a right relationship with Him. “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!...Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Rom. 5:9,11)

What does this mean? Many Christians think it means it no longer matters how we live. Some think we don’t have to do any good works because Jesus has done it all for us. Some even think that we are free to remain in sin because Jesus loves us and forgives us all our sins. Sometimes pastors, in an effort to avoid giving the impression that we can earn God’s grace by doing good works, give this impression. Martin Luther had this to say about preachers:

They think one should not frighten or trouble the people, but rather always preach comfortingly about grace and the forgiveness of sins in Christ, and under no circumstance use these or similar words, “Listen! You want to be a Christian and at the same time remain an adulterer, a whoremonger, a drunken swine, arrogant, covetous, a usurer, envious, vindictive, malicious, etc.!” Instead they say, “Listen! Though you are an adulterer, a whoremonger, a miser, or other kind of sinner, if you but believe, you are saved, and you need not fear the law. Christ has fulfilled it all! (On the Council and the Church, Luther’s Works, 41:113-114).

Nothing could be further from the truth! Paul asks the question for us earlier in Romans, “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1-2) God still wants you to obey His Law. God still expects you to do good works. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is to be active and alive in the hearts and lives of all Christians. The Good News is that we are now free. We are free from the threat of the Law because of Jesus’ fulfillment of that Law. We are free from the punishment for sin because Jesus endured that punishment and rose in triumph from the grave. We are free to do good for our neighbor without the pressure of the Law or the fear of punishment.

Though we often fail, we do not stop trying. We cling to the promises of the Word of God. We enthusiastically come to hear His Word. We eagerly receive the words of Absolution to cover our failures. We hungrily come to the Lord’s Table for the body and blood of Jesus to strengthen our

weaknesses. We leave this sanctuary to simply to live in the vocations where God has placed us to serve our neighbor with deeds of kindness and love which God Himself will prepare for us to do. (Eph. 2:10).

On Independence Day, we pause to consider the cost of our political freedom and give thanks. We joyfully live our lives as free citizens of this free country. In the Divine Service, we pause to consider the cost of our spiritual freedom for Jesus Christ and give thanks. We joyfully leave the sanctuary to live our lives as free citizens of the kingdom of God - worship of God and in service to our neighbor. In both cases, we are truly free. Let's live like it. Amen.