

Pentecost 3, July 3rd, 2011

Bound for Freedom

Romans 7:15–25; Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Lord of all the worlds, guide this nation by your Spirit to go forward in justice and freedom. Give to all our people the blessings of well-being and harmony, but above all things give us faith in you, that our nation may bring glory to your name and blessings to all peoples, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

“For you were called to *freedom*, brothers and sisters,”

Paul writes to the Galatians, “only do not use your *freedom* as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“For *freedom* Christ has set us free,” the Apostle wrote

earlier in this letter, “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Similarly, First Peter says that “As slaves of God, live as free people, yet do not use your *freedom* as a pretext for evil.”

And finally, in his Corinthian correspondence, Paul concludes, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is *freedom*.”

Obviously, these New Testament letters have a lot to say about freedom.

And, when you think about it, the entire Bible has a lot to say about freedom.

And with good reason: practically all of the Scriptures were written for people who were anything but free.

People who were enslaved in Egypt.

People who were exiled, or going into exile, in the foreign lands of Assyria and Babylon.

People who were living under the political tyranny of rulers like Antiochus Epiphanies IV and Herod Antipas.

People who were oppressed because of they confessed: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

The writings of the Bible were written chiefly for people whose experiences may have been similar to those who have come to this land—people who came from their own exile in religious oppression, out of political tyranny, from economic hardship, and the devastation of war.

Some of you were among those who were welcomed into the arms of this “Mother of Exiles,” as Emma Lazarus called the Statue of Liberty. For the rest of us, it was our parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents who received this welcome to be free.

Yet we, some generations later, tend to forget that most of our forebearers were nothing more than this—exiles who came here because they were, in the words of Lazarus, in her poem, “The New Colossus,” etched at the base of the Statue of Liberty, they were the “tired. . . the poor. . . the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . . .” They were “the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. . . these, the homeless, tempest-tossed. . . I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

And for their descendants, we who have prospered in this land, it is compelling for us to remember that for them, and for those “huddled masses” who continue to come, that freedom can mean life itself.

“You may say to yourself,” says Deuteronomy, “*My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.*’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.”

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to *a yoke of slavery.*”

Paul goes on in several of his letters to explain emphatically that freedom does not mean being free to “do

whatever I want to do,” as when people make the charge that, “It’s a free country, I’ll do as I please.”

“I’ll drive my car as fast as I want.”

“I’ll treat my kids anyway I please.”

“I’ll do to my neighbor whatever I feel like doing.”

“I’ll live my life the way I want, and you live yours the way you want.”

“Nobody’s going to tell me what to do! It’s a free country, I’ll do as I please.”

And this bondage to self, ultimately this bondage to sin, is what so many of us have come to call freedom, the freedom that so many of us celebrate on a weekend like this one.

“So free we seem,” wrote the poet Robert Browning,

“so free we seem, so fettered fast we are!”

Somehow, I don't think this notion, “It's a free country, I'll do as I please,” had anything to do with what the Founding Brothers had in mind when they spoke about “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

I am certain that the notion, “I'll do as I please,” was never in the minds of the New Testament writers when they said things like “. . . do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Freedom can be a big problem as it was for many of the early Christian communities, particularly for those in

Corinth, where many believed that freedom from the yoke of the Law meant freedom to do what they wanted: “It is actually reported,” Paul writes, “that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father’s wife.”

Time and again, Paul poses the question, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?”

And time and again, Paul answers adamantly, “No way! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

Today, that same Apostle confesses that he feels anything but free: “I can decide what I want to do,” he writes for all of us, “but I am powerless to do it.”

I think I know what he means.

When we are deciding what we ought to do with our lives, how we ought to act in a given situation, there seems to be a great divide between what we decide in our head to do and what we actually do.

I can decide in my head never to be impatient with my wife, never to worry about the kids, never to be disappointed with the congregation. But what happens?

“Wretched man that I am. Who can deliver me from *this slavery?*” Paul pleads for all of us.

His dilemma is the human dilemma: “We confess that

we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.”

We confess that the battle rages in the human heart between good and evil, flesh and spirit, my will and God’s will, right and wrong choices, thoughts, actions, and words.

We know the victor. But the battle rages.

Decades before Paul, the Roman poet Horace wrote in his epistles that “I pursue the things that have done me harm; I shun the things I believe will do me good.”

And about the same time, in the poem

Metamorphoses, Ovid put words in the mouth of Medea: “I see the right, and I approve it too, / Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue.”

So, there really isn’t such a thing as “freedom” if we define “freedom” as being free to “do what I please.”

The power of sin is more than we can cope with: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,” says Ephesians, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

For people who think they have a solution for everything, there is no such thing as “the cosmic powers of this present darkness” and “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” even though we blithely repeat the words Sunday after Sunday, “We confess that we are in bondage—bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.”

You see, sin has all but disappeared in our culture.

As one observer puts it, “Sin, on the one hand, has

been reduced to something like bad taste or a mistake—serving the wrong wine at a dinner or saying something embarrassing to oneself or to another. On the other hand, sin has been abstracted—so that pornography is a sin (as it should be regarded), but adultery is [only] a bad choice.”

A culture that does not take sin seriously cannot possibly recognize the sheer necessity of being saved from “the cosmic powers of the present darkness.”

“So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!”

“We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone,” they answered Jesus, “What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’”

“Jesus answered them, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone

who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Today, the prophet Zechariah portrays an unusual king who enters the holy city, a king who does not come mounted on a white stallion, riding high and looking down on his people, but a king who is “humble and riding on a donkey” at eye level with his people.

Here is a king, says the prophet, who will “cut off the chariot . . . the war horse . . . and the battle bow,” and who will usher in *shalom* (“peace”) for all nations, extending “from sea to (shining!) sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

It is only as we are yoked to Christ the King and his way that we truly can be at liberty.

After his conversion, St. Augustine noted that freedom means to be free, not to do what we want to do, but rather free to be whom God intends us to be.

Before that happens, he says, our lives are jerked around by other intentions, external and alien forces, distractions that hinder us from being all that we ought to be.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

Free for what?

Free to live at the expense of others?

Free to prosper while others wither?

Free to take as much as I can?

Free to do as I please?

“No way,” the Apostle resounds, for that would be submitting again to a “yoke of slavery.”

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

Free to love God.

Free to love humanity.

Free to welcome those “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

All in a country that has afforded us so many freedoms to do these things, freedoms to change the world, not for my good, but for the common good of the earth and its peoples.

“Come unto me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take *my*

yoke upon you, and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For *my yoke* is easy and my burden is light.”

Yes, we are bound for freedom.

We are bound to Christ for freedom.