

Proper 8, Year A, July 2, 2017

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our passage today from the apostle Paul is perhaps timely, considering that this Tuesday is the Fourth of July – a day where Americans celebrate their “freedom” from the “tyranny” of a monarch, from servitude to an unjust ruler.

Paul speaks similarly in the reading from last week. We heard in Romans 6:1-11, that those who have been “baptized into Christ Jesus” share in his crucifixion, with an eye to sharing in his resurrection as well. The result of being co-crucified with Christ is that we have been freed from serving an insidious monarch, namely, Sin.

Remember that in the Bible, “Sin” is a hostile power, a character that is aligned against God and his purposes for his creation. And Death is its henchman. This is very much in line with the whole of Romans 6, where the theme is “the assertion that life is a type of ‘slavery’, *either* to Sin *or* to God [emphasis mine].”¹

The theme of a servanthood that is “either/or” runs all the way through this passage.

Romans 6:12-23 – Either/Or Slavery

“Therefore, do not let sin exercise *dominion* in your mortal bodies”

Paul’s wordplay in this passage is fascinating. What is often translated “dominion” (βασιλεύω) could also be rendered “rule” or even “kingship”. In verse 14 the word that is translated “dominion” is a verbal form of the word “lord” (κύριος) – Sin looks to be “lord” over us. Paul is exhorting his hearers, in light of our common baptism into Christ Jesus, to no longer allow Sin to rule over us, to be our lord. Instead, as we see at the end of this passage, it is the Messiah Jesus who is our Lord (κύριος, v. 23).

As Christian people, we are no longer to “present” our “members”, our bodies, as “instruments” of “wickedness”, instead we are present ourselves as “instruments of righteousness.”

Unfortunately, the term “righteous” is not always the most well received nowadays. If I were to say of someone, “oh, that person is so righteous”, we would most likely not want to invite them out for a beer or have them over for supper. “Righteous” might conjure up in our minds an uptight person, perhaps quick to judge our children’s behavior or what pops up on our Netflix watch list. It certainly doesn’t bring to mind fun or freedom.

But that is not what Paul is speaking of here when he uses the term “righteousness”, some kind of moral curmudgeon. What he means to describe is a people who have been “set-right” by God. The story of the Bible tells of humanity’s willful rejection of life, love, flourishing, peace, non-

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 432.

violence – humanity since Genesis 3 has been “set-wrong”, Paul explicitly refers to humanity’s “set-wrongness” in Romans 1. This “set-wrongness” is what Paul is referring to with the term “wickedness”. In Greek, both “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη) and “wickedness” (ἀδικία) have the same root. “Wickedness” could be rendered then “arighteousness” or “without righteousness” (e.g., amoral or atheist).

Another way to think about this that might be helpful is that you could gloss these terms as “justice” and “injustice”. What Paul is saying here is that baptized people are to be “instruments” of justice, of God’s setting the world to rights, and not “instruments” of Sin’s injustice.

Those who are “in Christ” have been “brought” (v. 13), transferred, moved from one cosmic location to another, from one lordship to another. By virtue of our sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection, we have been ‘relocated’ from the realm of Sin and Death, into the realm of life in Christ.

v. 16 – “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?”

We are all servants to something – none of us are truly free. The idea that we are independent free-thinking decision-makers, self-made, and self-reliant is a fantasy. Here we find psychologists like Freud and Skinner in agreement with the apostle Paul! Even some contemporary research in biology and genetics seems to point to the fact that human behavioral decisions are largely influenced, even imposed upon, by outside factors. We are slaves either to one lord or another – *either* to death-dealing Sin, *or* to a justice-bringing God.

v. 22-23 – “But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

When Paul says in verse 23 that the “wages of sin is death”, remember, this is more a statement of how life actually works than about a vindictive God punishing us with death because we failed to meet some kind of arbitrary moral standard. If you’ve ever struggled with addiction, and frankly all of us are addicted to something to a greater or lesser extent, then you know that that addiction does not bring you joy and flourishing. It does not bring life or freedom – it is slavery.

“[B]ut the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Notice the contrast here. “Wages” are payments that are owed, earned, they’ve been worked for. On the other hand, God gives us what is not owed or earned, a “gift” that brings us into eternal life, achieved through the work of Jesus Christ, and by his Spirit. But it is a gift that he expects us to do something with! It is not simply for our own sakes, purely for our own benefit. Let’s not be spiritually self-centered.

We are not just freed *from* something – we are freed *for* something.

We have been set free to serve God’s right-setting project, to be the means by which the Triune God makes his Kingship known throughout the world. God’s desire is for human joy and flourishing, for the whole creation to be filled with God’s *shalom*.

“The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” – St. Irenaeus

What does full human life look like? We really don’t have to go far to find previews of it. Look around at some of the things that happen here at Grace. Take a look at some of the pictures from the recent youth mission trip. People having a place to rest, sleep, and eat, babies being lovingly held, children cared for instead of disposed of or trafficked. A place where every human life has unimaginable value and dignity; that’s what a just world looks like. The redeemed world that we look forward to is a realm where people are at peace with God and each other, sharing the complete self-giving love of our crucified Lord. And, because we have been set free, redeemed, to serve this right-setting project, we can experience this future world in the present.

As theologian Michael Bird notes, “Out of that redemption comes a free people, a people refusing to bow down and serve the idols of self or state because they are too busy bowing down to God and doubling over to pull one another up from the ground.”²

Because we are “enslaved to God”, we are free to love and serve each other; it’s so simple, so beautiful, and it’s absolutely the hardest thing in the world to do. But since we have died to Sin, we no longer need to be slaves to fear, anger, jealousy, gossip – by God’s grace we can be free from the things that rob us of the rich blessings he desires to gift us through others.

When people encounter us, do they encounter the person of Jesus? Because in our Gospel reading today, Jesus does not separate the message from the messenger – “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me” (Matt 10:1). If our neighbors do not encounter the risen Christ through us, how will they? If they do not meet Jesus in this community, then what have we been saved *for*?

We must constantly ask these questions of ourselves and of our community if we are to be, as our mission states, “a church community where every member lives as a disciple of Christ.” Matthew’s Gospel, and Paul’s letter to the Romans, tell us that people meet Jesus, and experience his Lordship, in and through *us*. This is what we have been set free *for*.

So, let’s take some time in the coming days to think about where our *true* “freedom” comes from, and whom we are serving with it.

Psalm 89 – “Truly, the Lord is our ruler; the Holy One of Israel is our King.”

Let us pray that people may say this of us. That through the witness of Grace Church, people may see that here, among us and through our Savior Jesus, the Holy One of Israel is our King, our Lord, and that we have no other.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scott E. Watson

² Michael F. Bird, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2016), 216.