

For Life, For Freedom
Romans 6: 1-14
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Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Julie, Valerie, Lauren, Merritt....all this week I've been trying to remember what it was like to be where you are....not being confirmed, because the tradition I grew up in didn't have confirmation....but here...at the end of 8th grade...a fairly major pivotal point in life...High School awaits...

And if I'm honest, one the strongest emotions I had the summer after 8th grade was wishing I was even older. What I wanted was freedom.

Looking back, it was the last, mostly carefree summer I had....but what I remember feeling was that it was the summer I wanted to be 16 and not 13 going on 14. 16 year-olds could drive and get away from their large and sometimes loud family. Or I wanted to be 18. 18 year-olds could move away to college and make decisions on their own. Or be 25...yes, 25 would be perfect. I would be out of law school (I already knew then) and making my own money and making my own decisions and have complete and total freedom.

Of course when I turned 25 my parents (who had helped pay for all of that education), and my bosses who were paying me that salary, and my landlord who rented me that wonderful own place, and so many others had expectations and I wasn't nearly as free as I thought I would be...at least not the kind of freedom I thought I would have when I had just graduated the 8th grade.

Freedom....

It's a fairly loaded word these days. Lots of freedoms get talked about today....

Freedom to marry....Freedom of religion....Freedom FROM religion...Freedom to have autonomy over one's own body and healthcare decisions....

Lots of freedoms get talked about today...but I'm not sure we have any of them actually right.

Paul is talking about freedom today...freedom from the powers of sin and death....it's the good news that follows last week's troublesome texts about grace and suffering....

Here, Paul isn't concerned about what your theory of the atonement is, he isn't concerned about whether you believe that grace comes first, or we have to ask for it first...

He just wants us to know that once we are within and under God's grace we are free....freed from being defined by anything other than being the beloved of God, the redeemed of Christ.

That freedom is not, as I was taught, mainly a get out-of-hell free card....I don't think that really has much to do with this at all...though others do disagree...

I think the freedom that Paul is talking about is that the YES that comes in God's grace is stronger than any NO others may try to use to define us or limit us....It is stronger than the NO that might come blazing over a heartless or vindictive social media post....it is stronger than the NO from that last job review....it is stronger than the internal NO of that thing you did or said and felt so terrible about afterward....it is stronger than the NO that comes screaming from a magazine or tv ad about the size of your body or the type of car you drive or the food you eat.

We live in a culture that is constantly trying to tell us that we are not enough...that if we just had this one more thing...we would be enough....

To all of that Paul says...no...that kind of thinking is resubmitting to slavery after you are freed from it.

And in reminding us of the freedom we have because of Grace, he is also reminding us that freedom is not exactly what we may be thinking it is....certainly not what I thought it would be when I was 13 and 14...but y'all are probably smarter than I am.

Having freedom doesn't mean you have no obligations; it doesn't mean there aren't consequences for the choices we make. Karl Barth described that kind of freedom as the freedom to make the right choices...or to choose slavery to sin. Freedom means we aren't condemned to always making the wrong choice...and it means that our choices don't ultimately determine whether God is going to love us or forgive us...our choices demonstrate who we want to be aligned with...God and good or sin and death...from whom we've already been liberated by Jesus Christ.

Seems like a fairly simple choice doesn't it?

David Lose is the former president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and is now a pastor in Minneapolis. He reminds us, like Paul does, that our "contemporary understanding of freedom misleads us into believing that, if you are lucky or strong or bold or beautiful and powerful enough, you can live absent from any obligations, any commitments, any requirements whatsoever. Paul therefore invites the Christians in Rome -- and by extension all of us -- to consider that the choice before us is not whether to be obedient or free, but rather to what we will be freely obedient. Further, Paul knows both that human nature tends to slide toward whatever seems easiest in the short run and that sacrificing short-term gratification for long-term happiness is difficult. He therefore promises that God has granted to us the freedom in Christ to strive for things that bring long-term happiness and eternal blessings. Paul believes, that is, that God has granted us the freedom and the ability to aspire to and achieve more than our surroundings or culture offers.

But it's not like some magical moment happens and we make the right choices after that.

John Newton understood that.

You may know who he is...you may have heard of him....you've certainly heard the most famous thing he ever wrote....we're going to sing it in a just a little while....

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

John Newton was a British sailor...his father had been a ship's captain and shortly after John's mother died when he was 7 years old...his father took him to sea....and John hated it. But he didn't have much choice.

He eventually, as a result of being a pretty rotten crew member, ended up working on a slave trading ship. These ships transported slaves from Africa to the Caribbean, and coffee and other goods from the Caribbean to England, and then money back to Africa to buy more slaves. It was one of the great shames of the western world, as was the continued existence of slavery in the Americas.

But John didn't seem to care much about all of that. He just wanted his money and wasn't willing to work very hard for it.

That led to him being marooned in Africa for a time when his captain threw him off his ship, essentially selling him to another slave trader who made him his wife's servant. She was reportedly very cruel to him and eventually he was rescued from all of that by another slave his father had hired to get him back.

You may have heard the story of John's voyage back to England. There was a storm and the boat was at risk...and John told the story of how he prayed...and how that night, his life was changed...He didn't come to faith that night...but a crack in the facade of disappointment and anger and sadness broke through.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me....I once was lost but now am found...was blind, but now I see....

Eventually, after several more years he would leave slave trading and become a minister....but he would still invest in slave trading companies for almost 20 more years...He didn't make all the right choices overnight...but he was trying...trying to live into the grace he had come to see that God had given him...

The Lord has promised good to me...his faith my hope secures...he will my shield and portion be....as long as life endures....

Around the time he wrote these words, he also wrote a long sermon/pamphlet that described his change of heart and his rejection of slavery as immoral and his hypocrisy as one who had earned so much from it...

No, he didn't make the right choices right away...but the freedom he received in God's grace kept working on him....moving him further and further down the path of grace and love and freedom...

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The freedom we celebrate today is the freedom that leads us home....It is not a freedom that says no harm will come to us...

That's important to remember in the wake of senseless tragedy like the Virginia Beach shootings this weekend.

A broken man believed something...we don't yet fully know what...and we may never...that the should's of the world weren't breaking his way...that the path he saw as the only path wasn't going according to plan...and his response was to strike out...to play God by claiming lives and terrorizing others...

Those who are gone too soon we place in God's hands for we cannot carry the burden of their senseless deaths...but in return God who mourns with us reminds us that one broken man will not define the lives he took, will not define Virginia Beach...will not define our nation or even one day in the life of the world...

His NO breaks our heart, but it echoes like a gunshot for just a sharp and painful moment...and God's YES sings on...reminding us who are...leading us home....to the home on earth and in eternity that God wills for each of us and all of us...

Confirmation is about the 4 of you claiming that freedom for yourselves...and about this church reaffirming its commitment to be a place that teaches and nurtures that freedom...That's why it's so appropriate that this is the day we also thank our Sunday School teachers...for they are the messengers of our freedom....as we learn the stories and we grow in understanding so that we join our story to all of the stories that have gone before...we begin to see how grace shaped the lives of a people and how grace can shape our lives....not into a freedom that says anything goes....but a freedom that invites us to choose love...to choose life...to choose hope...to choose justice...because these are the touchstones of the one who has made us free....

On Friday we celebrated the 200th birthday of one of the greatest poets of all time...Walt Whitman...a brilliant man who struggled with the restraints of a culture and religion that always sought to should him and everyone else to death...not concentrated on the freedom of grace, but the constraints of piety and holiness as they were then understood....

In his landmark *Leaves of Grass*...there is a moment when he seems to have a breakthrough....

He writes...

I am larger, better than I thought; I did not know I held so much goodness.
All seems beautiful to me.
Whoever denies me, it shall not trouble me;
Whoever accepts me, he or she shall be blessed, and shall bless me.

That is what Paul wants us to see...as the freed in Christ...we are larger...better than we thought...not because of anything we have done...but because we are made to hold the goodness of the Christ who welcomed friend and stranger, cared for the sick and rejected, died and was raised equally for the most despicable person we can imagine and the holiest...so that all might be free...Thanks be to God.