

You are slaves of the one whom you obey. And, you have a choice - a choice of who to obey. This is essentially what Paul is saying here in this part of Romans.

At the time Paul was writing to the Christ community in Rome, the Pax Romana was in full swing. The Pax Romana was the “Roman Peace,” but it was “Peace by Domination” - peace and order kept by force. The empire had a heavy and ever present hand on all things for all its many peoples, including these relatively new believers Paul was writing to. An article I read this week said it well...

The power and dominion of Roman rule spread its tentacles into every nook and cranny of human existence. Beginning with god Caesar as lord of all, every area of life ultimately submitted itself to that rule: military, economic, cultural, philosophical, educational and familial. (Bill O’Brien CC *Slave Wages*)

Paul’s letter to the Romans was not written in a bubble. He saw the world of these fledgling believers as critically important - that world was where this faith needed to count. Supporting them is what Paul was trying to do with this letter, especially because of the dominant narratives circulating in the culture around them.

Paul isn’t only about belief and helping these people “get it right” here - he’s trying to help them see themselves in a different light. Paul writes,

...thanks be to God that you, having been set free from sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, **having been set free from sin, have become** slaves of righteousness.

I came to Messiah from a suburban church in Minnesota where I served as the Youth & Family Minister. This meant that I worked with 5th and 6th graders on Sunday mornings and I organized our confirmation program. Part of that program, every year, was taking these 7-9th grade “confirmands” on a retreat. I remember one of those retreats well.

It was the fall of 2018 and we’d rented a bible camp for the weekend. That fall my marriage was finally crumbling, I had just moved out, and I was sick with a bad cold. But I was the Youth Minister and we had a retreat to do. So I piled into the school bus with the kids and off to camp we went.

The confirmation curriculum was on a three year cycle. Every fall we went back to the foundational stories: Genesis year 1, Exodus year 2, and I think some of the historical books year 3. This was year two so we were doing a deep dive into the Exodus (God sending Moses to “let my people go” and the great escape from Egypt). We looked to Walt Disney for help and watched *The Prince of Egypt*, breaking it into three chunks and having short discussions about each section. It was the evening of our first day together and we were finishing the second chunk of the movie that ended with God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. At that point we were going to talk about identity.

Do you remember what “identity” was like for you between 7th and 9th grade? If you were like me at that age, you were obsessed with yourself - how you looked, if you were “cool,” whether or not that special somebody liked you, etc. “Fitting in,” being “popular” and attractive “ordered your days.” These are typically the focus of identity at this age.

This part of the Exodus really emphasizes identity. The world had told Moses who he was (murderer, traitor, shepherd, failure, a poor orator). But then God shows up, tells Moses who he is (chosen, prophet, leader, servant), and all about the work God needs him to do. Go back to Egypt and remind my people who they are (My chosen people).

After watching the movie and a little conversation about identity, we closed with an exercise. Handing each kid a piece of paper and a pencil, we asked everyone to write down the identities they had and wanted to let go of - identities that God wanted them to let go of, identities that kept them from knowing their belovedness in Christ.

My piece of paper was too small: My marriage had given me so many identities, names, and labels that after filling one side I had to flip it over. But on that otherside, I just wrote one word - unloveable. We ended the exercise by walking outside into a damp, fall night and throwing our pieces of paper into a big fire. I stood at that fire for a long time after watching the paper disappear. It wasn't a magical transformation, but I felt something like possibility, an opening into a future - a future "set free", and a future I could not yet see.

A foundational change had happened to these Roman Christians: They had been transformed by this message about Jesus into a people “set free.” Paul wants them to see this. This transformation is not just a new status or another rung on the discipleship ladder - it is a new identity entirely, a new creation. And not only that. **This is a transformation that puts them, that writes them, into the narrative of a much bigger story than the one being told around them.** It’s the foundational story of God stepping into history for the sake of deliverance, liberation, healing and freedom.

This is the story of God that Jesus tells - Emmanuel, God-with-us. (In the First Nations Version of the New Testament, Jesus is called “Creator sets free.”) That story in which he’s key for us, was first a story Jesus heard told - a story Jesus likely learned as a child - the story of a once powerful man who did a terrible thing and ran for his life, who God found and told to go back and lead his people out of slavery into a new place and a new life. Through this man, God led them out of slavery into freedom. Through water, God brought them to Godself.

This is a story into which we have been adopted, like the Roman Christians - a story that tells us who God is and that tells us who we are, beyond the cultural narratives in which we swim. In this story we know our identity, and it’s an identity that we re-tell in every baptism - an identity whose origin lies in this foundational story. The story of God choosing a people, delivering them from slavery to sin through water and word, and bringing them to Godself as beloved children.

Into this story, Jesus has liberated us and has made us a new creation. For the Roman Christians and for us, that work has been done and accomplished, but our politics, culture, and life in the world have not transformed with us overnight.

So this is the choice Paul lays out for them and for us: In light of this freedom, this new creation in Christ, to whom will you be enslaved? To sin, the wages of which are death, or to righteousness, which leads to sanctification (in other words holiness, a “set-apartness” that leads to life)? Even in the midst of a world-dominating empire (not unlike the one we live in), he is inviting them to lean into that new form, that new createdness.

What does that mean for us? Each of us, having been made a new creation in Christ, we have been transformed into the bearers of this story.

This is the story we will teach to Pearl, newly baptized, and we will remind her of it every chance we get. Telling her story and knowing that it’s ours too - this is the life to which we enslave ourselves, the life to which we are called. But this story about who God is and who God has made us does not belong only to Pearl or only to us. It’s a story every person needs to hear and know. Because the dominant narratives of our lives today are so small.

Democrat, republican. Comfortably retired, service industry worker, divorced, married, single, partnered, gender-queer, cis-generated, gay, straight, bi, trans, etc. These identities matter, certainly - they shape our lives, perspectives and lived experience. But not one of them defines a life (Neither Jew nor Greek, male or female...) Ours are lives defined by a bigger story, a story we tell by word and deed; fundamentally, a story of welcome.

Isn't that it? Isn't that our story? God's welcome to us, to life beyond slavery to the small stories?

Jesus brings that welcome to the forefront in our gospel reading. "Whoever welcomes, welcomes me." It's a welcome into a new identity, a new creation, in light of this big story. "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones..." An act of hospitality and even generosity, to be sure. But in the context of this bigger story, is that water not so much more?

AMEN.