

**“FREEDOM FROM AND FREEDOM FOR”**

**Romans 6:12-23**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

**Woodbury UMC**

**June 28, 2020**

Today, June 28<sup>th</sup>, happens to fall between two great celebrations of freedom in our country. One is not so well known to much of our population; the other is as familiar to all of us as the stars and stripes, hot dogs, and fireworks.

Two Fridays ago, June 19 was observed by many African-Americans as Juneteenth. It commemorates the day in 1865 that Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas, with news that the Civil War had ended and that slaves were now free. Note that this was two and a half years after President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. The announcement of liberation was tragically late reaching Texas, but it was received with great rejoicing by those who still languished under the yoke of slavery. For this reason, many African-Americans regard Juneteenth as a hallowed day, especially this year as racial injustice continues to fester in our society.

And then, next Saturday, the Fourth of July, is the anniversary of the date in 1776 when the American colonies declared their independence from British rule and founded a new country. With it came a new form of government and a new way of life that safeguards basic human freedoms such as freedom of assembly, speech, and worship.

Both Juneteenth and July 4<sup>th</sup> fulfill one of the deepest yearnings of the human heart – the yearning to be free. However, it’s important to note that the desire for freedom moves into two directions. We want to be free from one situation in order to be free for a new and better situation. When you injure your arm and have it placed into a sling, your activity is limited. Your goal is not only to get rid of the sling, but also to be able to use your arm normally again. You want freedom from one thing and freedom for something else.

So, on the one hand, human beings want to be free from oppression and constraint. In the Old Testament, the children of Israel longed to be free from their bondage to the Egyptians. In our own country’s history, colonial Americans wanted to be free from the rule of a distant, despotic king; and black slaves wanted to be free from the ownership and domination of their masters. This is freedom from. On the other hand, you and I want to be free for a life that is self-directed, where we have options, as well as the power to choose among those options. We want to call our own shots, to be in control of our lives.

One of the reasons Americans celebrate Juneteenth and the Fourth of July is that we need to be reminded of our freedom and be grateful for it, because we can easily take freedom for granted. We don’t fully appreciate the value of our freedom until we lose it or realize we never had it in the first place.

A prominent black leader had this to say about the current racial unrest in America: “What you see today is the awakening of a sleeping giant. Blacks were given their basic freedom by the Emancipation Proclamation and, 100 years later, given some of the entitlements of freedom through the civil rights movement. Back in the 1960’s, we thought we were finally inheriting the

full promise of freedom, but that turned out to be an illusion. Prejudice and discrimination have persisted, and by and large we have just put up with it quietly over the past fifty years. We have been like restless sleepers in the middle of a bad dream who were muttering in our sleep. But with the murder of George Floyd and others like him, we have fully awakened again. We are crying out for justice and freedom, and we will not stop until our cries are heard and heeded.” Listening to this man’s painful testimony, it any wonder that Juneteenth had special significance for black Americans in the year 2020?

And then, one thinks about the infringements on our freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the most part, we and the persons we love the most have been spared of the illness itself; but none of us has been spared the lifestyle changes required to curb the illness – the shutdowns and lockdowns, the face masks and social distancing. I dare say all of us have grown weary of these restrictions; some folks have been especially irritated by them; and some have openly protested them and refused to abide by them. What this reveals is that you and I tend to equate freedom with having unlimited mobility and unrestricted choices – you know, the freedom to go anywhere at any time, to get what we want when we want it. “Free as a breeze, do as I please.” For those of us who define freedom this way and take this kind of freedom for granted, the pandemic has been a nightmare.

The letters of the apostle Paul – especially his letter to the Romans – contain dense, complex theological arguments that sometimes leave us scratching our heads. But underneath all this verbiage is a profound personal struggle that you and I can fully identify with. Throughout his life, Paul tries to discern what true freedom is and how he can attain it.

Remember that Paul belongs to religious minority groups in the Roman Empire – first Jewish and then Christian – and this gets him into trouble at times. But Paul is also a Roman citizen; so, by definition, he is a free man. He enjoys the rights and protections due to any full citizen of the empire, a status which saves his neck on more than one occasion. He is also considered free because he is not a slave; and this is no small matter because he lives in a society where slavery is rampant.

And yet, here in his letter to the Romans, Paul says that in fact he has been a slave in another sense: he has been captive to the power of sin. In theory, he has been free to do the right thing in the sight of God; but in practice, he has not been free at all. He’s had the best of intentions, but he has continually made resolutions to himself and promises to God that he could not keep. Paul tells us that he has been a slave to sin, and then has the audacity to suggest that his readers, including us, are bound by this same form of slavery.

Of course, you and I may be put off by Paul’s metaphor. Slavery is now regarded as an abomination, so we resist the notion that we are slaves to anything or anybody. But who among us would claim to be fully free – free to be all that we can be, free to do the will of God in all things? If we want a contemporary version of Paul’s metaphor, think about the power of an addiction. Simply stated, an addiction is any substance or behavior over which we lose control. We may be capable of making choices in many areas of our lives; but in this area, we no longer have the freedom of choice. We resolve to change our troublesome behavior, but either we cannot bring ourselves to change or we cannot make the change permanent. We say, “I can’t help myself; I feel powerless.” If you have never said those words, you are either being dishonest with yourself or you are a one-of-a-kind saint. There are areas in all our lives where we surrender control to the

forces of darkness. This is what Paul means when he speaks of our slavery to sin, and none of us is immune to it, least of all Paul himself.

And so, Paul looks for a way to be free from sin, to harness his negative impulses and activate his positive impulses. He looks specifically to the Jewish Law – a set of rules and guidelines, do's and don'ts – to keep him on the straight and narrow. But the Law doesn't bring Paul the spiritual freedom that he hopes for. To the contrary, his striving to be obedient to the Law becomes another form of slavery. Have you ever had an authority figure in your life who said, "An 'A' is not good enough; only an 'A+' is acceptable"? "Doing a good job is not adequate; only a perfect job will suffice"? Well, at one stage in his life, Paul sees God as this kind of authority figure. He believes that God will be pleased with him only if he follows every rule of the Law to a T, so he gets caught in the trap of perfectionism and becomes a religious overachiever. Try as he might, he cannot keep the Law to perfection, and he still feels captive to the power of sin.

The Epistle to the Romans is like Paul's Declaration of Independence: he announces that he has been set free from sin not by his own efforts but by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Through God's forgiveness and transforming power, he has been released from his dark compulsions, perfectionism, and paralyzing fear of God. So far, so good. This is what Paul has been set free from; but the question remains, what has he been set free for? Once he is liberated from slavery to sin and the Law, what does the new life under grace look like? Is it just "free as a breeze, do as I please"? Is it, "Anything goes, because God will forgive me anyway"?

Paul responds with an emphatic "no." Ironically, he concludes that living under the freedom of grace involves an alternative form of slavery. On the surface, this makes no sense. Who in their right mind wants to exchange one form of slavery for another? But here, Paul is simply recognizing that all human beings are subservient to something or somebody. As he puts it, we are "slaves of the one [whom] we obey" (Romans 6:16). What we habitually submit to is what rules us. It might be a cellphone, a computer, a credit card, or a peer group; or, it might be a daily discipline of prayer and Scripture reading or the call to perform regular acts of service to others. In sum, the Christian life is not a matter of choosing whether we will be ruled, but rather choosing what (or who) will rule us. The ultimate choice, Paul says, is whether we will become "slaves of sin" or "slaves of righteousness" (vv. 17-18).

And here's the ultimate irony: it is in our slavery to God and God's righteousness that you and I are truly free. Freedom isn't my right to do anything I wish; it is being set free from slavery to sin and being set free for a higher obedience. The great theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer described Christian freedom this way: "freedom is not something one has for one's self but something one has for others . . . freedom is not a quality which [which an individual possesses] . . . but a relationship and nothing else. In truth, freedom is a relationship between two persons. Being free means 'being free for the other.'"

The Christian writer Roberta Bondi makes a similar claim. She says: "Freedom is, at its roots, not about options. At least in the Christian context, freedom is about love, what we love, how we love . . . We may rightly want to live as expansively as possible," she says, "but in fact, we are limited, we can't have it all, we have to close some doors. To focus our energies, to suffer imperfection, to work things out, to wait out a storm – all these are essential ingredients in commitments that last." Bondi reminds us that loving relationships involve freely chosen constraint. "We need," she says, "to be a bit suspicious of our culture's infatuation with options."

It occurs to me that during the current pandemic, we Methodists have received an unexpected gift. We have rediscovered the “General Rules” set forth by John Wesley for the societies he founded 250 years ago. Now, no one emphasized the grace of God and the freedom of the Christian more than Wesley, but he never equated freedom with license – “I’m going to do it my way and everybody else be damned.” No, the Christian life still involves living up to God’s expectations and meeting the standards of a faith community. Wesley was not apologetic about calling his guidelines “rules,” and he established three of them: “Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.” Wesley made his rules for Christian living that simple, that profound, and that challenging. And notice that the 3 rules are not framed as attributes of individuals; they are about relationships.

If we apply the General Rules to the pandemic, our first obligation is to protect the safety and health of other people. If we are required to sacrifice some of our personal freedom to do this, so be it. You know the drill: stay home as much as possible; wear face coverings and keep a safe distance from other people when you must go out; and, now that businesses and churches are being reopened, be extra vigilant about your own self-care and the welfare of others. Yes, these gestures are getting tiresome and annoying, but they are a small price to pay in order to ensure the common good. So the first rule of the Christian life is, “do no harm.”

Second, Wesley says, “do good.” Living under grace does not mean that we become complacent in God’s acceptance of us and cease to do good works. We still do them; if anything, we do more of them than ever before. But we do them for a different reason. We do good, not just to conform to a set of rules or feel better about ourselves or impress other people or win God’s approval. We do good not out of obligation but out of gratitude – gratitude for the love of God that we don’t have to earn but is already freely given to us. In that spirit of gratitude, you and I look for ways to do good in bad times – reaching out to those who are physically and financially vulnerable; those who are isolated, fearful, or grieving; those who are feeling the sting of prejudice, injustice or violence.

Do no harm. Do good. And then, John Wesley’s third rule says, “Stay in love with God.” Let me ask you: how do you stay in love with a life partner? By working at the relationship; by communicating regularly and honestly; by focusing on your partner’s positive qualities; by reinforcing your love for your partner by expressing that love through words and deeds. The same is true of our love relationship with God. My guess is that you will never have a better opportunity than you now have during the pandemic to slow down and center down, to find an oasis of solitude and quiet, and out of that quiet center to speak and listen to the living God. If you really want to stay in love with God, this is the perfect time to foster growth and intimacy in that relationship.

Friends, the promise of the gospel is that we are set free from the power of sin; the challenge of the gospel is that we are set free for a life in which we use our freedom responsibly by being obedient to God and loving in our relationships with others. By being slaves to God and God’s righteousness, we are “free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last!”