

July 2, 2017
Romans 6:12-23; Genesis 22:1-21

Every Presbyterian candidate for pastoral ordination must undergo a complete psych evaluation. Potential ministers are checked for basic mental health, as well as particular personal behaviors. Within the psych evaluation, one of the tests is a personality indicator. The Myers-Briggs is most commonly used. It alerts people to their natural inclinations and basic behaviors. My Myers-Briggs reading suggests that I am a rule follower. (Perhaps this will not surprise you...) I am ruled by law. I think about the black and white boundaries in life. Now, don't get me wrong, I love grace. I admire my more free-spirited husband, and some days I can live with more abandon. But my initial way of dealing with life begins with questions of right and wrong.

For yourself, you can likely identify with one or the other. Are you naturally a rule follower or a free spirit? If you know the answer for yourself, and maybe the answer for a close friend or family member, you know the difference between being ruled by the law or ruled by grace.

Within the Romans text, Paul pointed to the difference between those ruled by law (speaking directly about the Torah and the Ten Commandments), and those ruled by grace (living within Christ's freedom). Those living by the law were slaves to sin; each time they broke a law, they needed to make reparation. They needed to seek atonement. Specifically, they needed to present and sacrifice an animal in the Temple. Jesus Christ changed the law, however. Jesus freed us from the need to continually make reparations for our sin. We were freed from the constant cycle of sinning, then paying to make everything better. Christ paid the cost of our sin with his death. He paid the cost for all of our sin. For everyone. Forever. Thus, we are free to live

life in God's grace. Truly, free to live in grace because we did not pay anything. We did not suffer anything.

Even though we are free, however, we often live as though we are still captive to the law. Paul wrote that we are slaves to the one whom we obey. Essentially, we are held captive by our behavior, and the motivations of our behavior. (The Myers-Briggs' personality test authors would agree. Our innate programming dictates how we will respond to relationships and situations.) Paul wasn't just talking about personalities. He was writing about spiritual behavior and spiritual captivity. As God's children, we *should* do what God wants. We should be God's instruments on earth. We *should* do good and act righteously, not sinfully. "Do not present yourselves to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as instruments of righteousness."

Perhaps you have thought of yourself as God's child – God's son or daughter. Perhaps you have thought of yourself as a disciple or follower of Jesus Christ, but have you thought of yourself as God's instrument? That is the image Paul used here. An instrument. A tool or a musical instrument. Something that does not have a will of its own, but is controlled by an operator. An implement that can be used to build or make or accomplish something bigger than itself. A piano can make beautiful music, but not without a wonderful player. A chisel can bring towering cathedrals into the world, but not by sitting in a toolbox. Instruments need craftsmen to bring their wonder into reality. If we are God's instruments, how might God play or use you in the world?

Desmond Doss was a soldier in World War II who saw himself as God's instrument. The movie "Hacksaw Ridge" portrayed his life around the beginning of the war. Doss prayed that God would use him for good, despite the horror that surrounded him. When many in similar

circumstances choose between serving God or country, Doss found a way to serve both. He believed that by being God's instrument of righteousness, he would also serve and better those around him. For Doss understood that he was first Christian, then American. His primary allegiance was to God. When fellow soldiers bullied him and threatened him because of his beliefs, when his desire to serve both God and country came into conflict with one another, he chose God's way.

As we live through these politically tumultuous days, and celebrate the 4th of July, we, too, must ask how we can be God's instrument? Serving God first, even if and when serving God conflicts with our identity as Americans. It isn't easy to do so. It takes work. We educate ourselves about the issue and advocate with those in power – in corporations and political office – to serve God in all that we do. There are any number of issues around which Christians (and Presbyterians) have organized: environmental stewardship, abolition of the death penalty, fair wages, and hunger ministries. Most recently, the Presbyterian Church has garnered attention for activities within the Sanctuary movement. Presbyterians have long advocated for safe passage and “sanctuary” for all refugees and immigrants. Presbyterians (and other Christians) follow God's command to care for friends and strangers, to offer shelter even when our country's laws prohibit us from doing so. Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona offered sanctuary to one woman and her two sons for 461 days. The small congregation banded together to care for her family and protect her through an arduous legal process. They continue to be a leader in the Sanctuary movement, posting this pledge on their congregation's website: “We pledge to resist the elected Administration's policies targeting deportation of millions of undocumented immigrants, and discrimination against marginalized communities. We will open up our

congregation and community as sanctuary space for those targeted by hate, and work alongside our friends, families, and neighbors to ensure the dignity and human rights of all people.”

The Presbytery of Long Island continues our own forays into the Sanctuary movement. At last week’s Presbytery meeting, we had a lengthy discussion about our neighboring Presbyterian congregations who plan to offer Sanctuary to undocumented – “illegal” – immigrants. The Presbytery reminded people of the biblical witness around this issue – for God’s people who have been immigrants (Hagar and Ishmael, Ruth and Naomi, and even Mary & Joseph), and God’s continued commands to care for those in need (to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger). Pastors and Long Island Presbyterians are rolling up our sleeves for the work ahead of us. There are thousands of people living here working on farms, in hospitality and landscaping and domestic positions – who all need our help. There are Presbyterians on Long Island who are afraid to leave their homes because of the threat of being taken by law enforcement. They are afraid to go to church and school and food banks. They are afraid to ask for help for fear of drawing attention to their status of “illegal.”

In cases like these, if we were to live according to the law, we would be led into sin. Because our national law is in direct opposition to who God calls us to be. And we were freed from that law of sin and enslaved to God. Our primal identity is as children of God. We were called to be instruments of righteousness, and instruments of grace in a world that desperately needs signs of God’s handiwork. Open yourselves so that God may use you wherever you go this week. And let’s pray that our country would be open to serving as God’s instrument in the world. A tool that does not exert its own will, but is used by the Master to accomplish something bigger than ourselves.