

Sermon 7 Pentecost Year A (Proper 8)

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St. John's Episcopal Church

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Paul's Letter to the Romans, from which we heard today, is different from all the rest of his correspondence. His other writings were addressed to churches which he had either founded or strongly shaped. But this letter is sent to a Church where Paul has never been and over which he does not hold any sort of parental authority. Consequently, Romans is a dense introductory treatise, full of language which is basic to Christian theology – grace and law, sanctification and justification.

Years ago, when I was serving a tiny Methodist Church in Harrisburg, PA, I held a Lenten Wednesday evening series on these concepts. It was tough sledding, especially when we got to the word 'grace'. I explained it as God's acceptance of us, given before we do anything to earn it – before repentance or good deeds or promises for amendment of life.

It was clear that they thought I was presenting them with some kind of Communist plot. The part of Romans they liked best, is contained in today's lesson, and is to be found painted on the sides of barns along back country roads all through the center of that state: The wages of sin is death. There was a theology you could really sink your teeth into!

In our community gathered here, the idea of grace is not as radical and difficult. In fact, I told Mariann long ago, after being at St. John's a couple years, that the problem here is not preaching grace, but trying to talk about sin. I remember the Lenten Wednesday evening series here in which I was trying to get members of a small group to buy into the idea that there are actions which are definitely sinful. It was as hard as discussing grace with my folks in PA. This suggests that the part of today's lesson which is the biggest challenge to us is the language about obedience and slavery to sin or to God.

We don't like to see ourselves as unable to freely decide what to think or do. Modern Western people, we tend to view ourselves as autonomous individuals who can choose with few constraints from the variety of options that

life presents us. We are not slaves to anything. The question, of course, is whether that is actually true.

While there is probably nobody overtly dictating that we have to do this or not do that, must believe one thing or another, the reality of our lives is that we are continually bombarded, in every possible medium, by a thousand messages, whose intent is to cause us to behave in certain ways. And if these were not at least somewhat effective, there would not be billions of dollars spent on advertising to shape our priorities.

What if slavery is no longer mostly a matter of being owned outright by one human master? What if it is a pervasive system of suggestion, and attractive temptation, which is potentially more dominating precisely because it is more subtle? The question of slavery for us might be put this way: To what and to whom are we offering ourselves on a daily basis?

When Paul talks about slavery to sin, he is not referencing a particular list of supposedly forbidden behaviors about which one can argue – is drinking a sin, or dancing, or pre-marital sex? William Loader, Professor of Religion at Murdoch University in Australia, describes the essence of sin as, “The slavery of destructive ruts and routines in which we allow our lives to be determined by satisfying our cravings without any thought about the consequences for ourselves or others – whether that is as unsophisticated as extra-marital sex or as sophisticated as ripping off the developing world through hogging wealth and resources. Then we are caught up in a power network which produces destructive behavior.”

Or as Bob Dylan put it more succinctly, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed, You’re gonna have to serve somebody. Well it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

Only when we can let ourselves be aware of the degree to which our choices are not from real freedom can we be open to the liberation that is offered us in the Gospel. If you can’t acknowledge that you are confined in a cage, however attractively appointed it may be, then there is no reason to listen to someone who offers you the key to the door.

Perhaps there are questions that could help us see the boundaries within which we are living. Do we harvest our resources right up to the limits, or do we have a margin from which to give and serve? Do we spend all the energy and time that we have on maintaining work and home and family, or is there some space left over to wait for God? Are we driven by fear of all the ways in which

things currently seem to be coming unglued in this country, ever more frantic to be sure that we've at least got our own? And if there is no margin, no space, no place of restful confidence, are we truly free?

The liberation from cultural slavery comes when we are willing to choose obedience to God which draws us into love and grace. I know, as soon as I use that word 'obedience' it conjures up images of being scolded and controlled, images of the Prussian general: You will do it, and you will like it. But true obedience has no connection to this kind of command. A better way to think of it is put by Andrew Krivak in his book, [A Long Retreat](#). "Obedience. From the Latin *ob-audentia*. It means not to be compliant with a rule, as we take it narrowly to mean, but *to listen*, to put your ear to, understanding that it is at heart a desire to hear the voice of God."

The thing is, in our noisy society, listening may be the hardest thing we will ever do. It requires time, it requires patience, and it requires that we shut up. Tony Hillerman writes a series of crime novels set on the Navaho reservation in New Mexico. Over and over again, the stories observe that in the Navaho tradition it is unthinkable to interrupt another before she is done speaking, usually leaving some silence in between to be sure that the speaker has completed his thought. One of the things that most baffles the Navaho about us Caucasians, is that we can't seem to stop, to wait, and actually listen to another.

If we are obedient to God, put our ear to God, we would be stopping, waiting with patience, not filling all the air-time with our own ideas and questions, however wonderful they may be. God might be trying to be heard in quiet prayer, but perhaps just as much in the voice of our spouse or partner, of our parent or child, of a member of the church, perhaps even of that truly annoying person we try hard to avoid. The discipline of obedience, of true, deep listening, requires intent and space and time. But it offers us the key to unlock our present captivity to a demanding, enslaving culture, a way to step free and into God's love.

This morning in the baptismal service, the parents and godparents will be asked if they "...renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God... renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God... renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God." In other words, they, and we, are asked if we will turn away from our slavery to an incoherent multitude of things, and choose the only thing that is a unity, namely loving *ob audentia* to God.

It is when we enter this deep listening that we become truly free – free to love each other, to serve one another, to become the parents and children and spouses that in our hearts we wish to be. I can think of no greater gift to give your child or yourself than this profound liberation. Over two thousand years, the voice of Paul comes down to us asking the fundamental question: whom will you serve? If, as Dylan observes, you've got to serve somebody, then the yoke which fulfills rather than drains our humanity is that of Jesus. We are called to put our ears to the voice of God.