

Texts: Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

It's that time of year again – Tuesday is Independence Day, the day we celebrate this grand experiment that we call democracy. The day that we remember a group of men 241 years ago who wrote a manifesto declaring that they no longer would claim allegiance to the British king. They were starting a new nation, one whose people would govern themselves. People should be free, they claimed, to pursue happiness, to live without fear of tyranny.

The trouble is, all too often freedom has come to mean that you can do whatever you please, with no constraints. The great idol of our modern age is the concept of personal freedom. We want to drive with no seat belts, wages without taxes, cell phone plans with no limits. Freedom has come to be identified with purchasing power. Freedom has come to be identified with property rights. Freedom has come to mean achievement. And unfortunately, to some people, freedom has come to mean that the government is the enemy and that they are exempt from any laws that they don't agree with.

That is not what Christian freedom means at all.

We Christians proclaim that we are free, but that we are free in a very different way. Here is what Martin Luther said about freedom: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. And a Christian is a perfectly bound and dutiful servant, subject to all." These two statements are a paradox. They seem to contradict each other but both are true. We are free, yet bound. We are lords, yet servants. We are subject to none, yet subject to all.

In today's reading from the letter to the Romans, we hear Paul reflecting on the nature of sinfulness. Paul uses the language of slavery and freedom to describe how

Christians live. And before I go any further, we need to reflect on that word “slave.” Because the other legacy of this American Independence Day is that back in 1776, when that group of men gathered in a room in Philadelphia, there were hundreds of thousands of people living in this land whose life, liberty and pursuit of happiness were not included in their Declaration of Independence. Slavery was a brutal and demeaning institution, and it still leaves marks on our national conscience. So we need to approach that word with caution.

What does St. Paul mean when he tells his Roman congregation, and us, his Chadron congregation, that we are slaves? It’s not about involuntary servitude, being bought and sold against your will. Paul’s meaning is about who it is that you give your ultimate allegiance, loyalty, service and obedience. To be a slave is to surrender your life to the control of another. You have a choice, he says. You can be enslaved to sin, or you can be enslaved to righteousness.

For Paul, sin is not the breaking of the rules, but the breaking of a relationship. From the very beginnings of the Biblical story – from Adam, from Cain and Abel – from the story of Noah and the story of the tower of Babel, we learn the truth that sin is the power that seizes hold of God’s good gifts and bends them toward death. Sin separates us from the God who created us. Sin inhabits us like a virus lying dormant in our bodies. Sin makes us think that we can manage on our own. Sin is a craving that we cannot satisfy.

The good news is this: In Jesus Christ, God came into this world to free you and forgive your sins. God has reconciled you, welcomed you, brought you back home. God has freed you from the captivity to achievement, and competition, and needing to be perfect.

You have been set free from sin in order to surrender your life to God. Being set free from sin means that your loyalties change. You no longer pledge your allegiance to your own desires; you pledge allegiance to what God desires. You no longer pledge allegiance to walking in your own direction; you pledge allegiance to walking in God's direction. You no longer pledge your allegiance to whatever personal rights you think you deserve; you pledge allegiance to righteousness, being in a right relationship with God.

But the paradox of Christian freedom is that you haven't simply been given freedom *from*. You have been given freedom *for*.

Freedom to ask "Who is my neighbor?" And then to love that person as yourself. Freedom to work for the common good. Freedom to serve those who are in need. Freedom to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, visit the person who is sick or in prison. That's what it means to be a disciple – to be free to love and serve your neighbor.

This morning we hear Jesus' encouraging those who would be his disciples, those who follow him, those who he is sending out to do the work of the kingdom. He tells them that the simplest act has heavenly repercussions

Just as God sent Jesus into the world, Jesus sends his disciples out into their world. "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, he tells them, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Jesus sends us out into our world with the same instructions. The entire baptized body of Christ is sent into the world to tell the good news of Jesus Christ and to live out the good news in your actions. This is the nature of the kingdom we pray for when we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." The kingdom of heaven is not up in the clouds somewhere, but right here, right now among those of us gathered for worship. The kingdom of heaven can be found right here in this community. The kingdom of

heaven is very near, always breaking through wherever someone is blessing another person, helping another person, praying for another person.

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. And a Christian is a perfectly bound and dutiful servant, subject to all.” You have been set free from sin, and you have surrendered yourself to become a slave to God. And in this freedom, in this surrender, whatever you do in the name of Jesus will be remembered. Every act of kindness and generosity makes a difference beyond what you can see. Every act of discipleship, no matter how small, reverberates out and is gathered into God’s work to love, bless, and save this world.

It can be as small a thing as smiling at the stranger you see instead of ignoring them. Offering someone who grieves a shoulder to cry on. Welcoming the new kid in school or at camp. Writing a letter to your Senator or Congressman about an important issue. Showing up for a march to protest the abuse of power. Thanking a law enforcement officer or someone in the military for their service. Offering to buy some school supplies for a teacher whose budget has been cut. Helping out at Closer to Home. Being there when your kids need you. Volunteering to help teach Wednesday School or deliver groceries for the Shepherd’s Pantry. Speaking up for someone being discriminated against. Buying fair trade coffee. Sending a birthday or anniversary card. Supporting one of the many social service agencies of our church. Giving a cup of cold water to one of these little ones.

As this Independence Day approaches, remember who you are and remember whose you are. Remember what freedom really means. Remember that in Jesus’ death and resurrection you have been set free from sin, so that you can surrender your entire life to God. Remember the eternal gift that you have been given.