

An anonymous person once said, “If you celebrate Independence Day on just one day of the year, it goes on to show that you are not really free. Learn to celebrate your freedom every day.” I find this quote very interesting because it talks about our sense and understanding of not only our nation’s independence, but also our understanding of personal freedom or personal independence. And, it alludes to the fact that **in many ways we are not really free**. On this weekend when we celebrate our independence as a nation, we also find ourselves living in an age when personal independence and perceived personal freedoms have become idols. And, any time we worship an idol we are not really free. So, I find it fascinating that on this day we hear the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, words that are both offensive and necessary.

It is true that, when Paul uses the word “slavery,” his understanding of this word was considerably different than ours. He lived in an age when the relationship between slave and master needed no explanation. The Greco-Roman world assumed a slave economy in which most people served those placed above them. Slavery was understood and accepted by all. However, in our day, “slavery” brings to mind 300 years of social evil. We hear the word “slavery” and are reminded of 300 years of a sinful

practice that has not only adversely shaped our nation but created a rupture so great it **continues** to shape us as we face the many aspects of racism we find in contemporary culture. As we look at Paul's message, we need to get beyond the word "slavery" to understand he is talking about the idea of ultimate allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and service.

To be a slave as Paul understands it is to surrender your life to the control of another. And, understanding slavery in this way, we find that we are **all** slaves of one sort or another. While we are a people who are heavily invested in the **illusion** that we think for ourselves, choose for ourselves and do for ourselves, the reality is there are **so many things** that **control** our lives. Money, personal wealth, Wall Street, success, fashion, sports, physical fitness, family, keeping up with the Jones' (whomever they may be), the way we spend our leisure time, addictions of all kinds, **even** our sense of patriotism – the list goes on and on and on. All we need do is pay attention to what occupies our thoughts and how we spend our time and money and we will discover that which truly enslaves us. Not only are we enslaved to many of these things and aspects of life, we have built large cathedrals and shrines where we can worship these idols – note our big sports facilities and the shopping malls one can find in virtually any

community. We are **all** serving something or someone, and today's words from St. Paul invite us to ask the question, "**Whom** or **what** do you serve?"

The apostle Paul sees only two possible answers, two possible masters: righteousness **or** everything else. Paul says the only two possible masters are God **or** sin. Quite honestly, Paul sees nothing wrong in having a master because he knows everyone has one, but who or what is that master? It is *whom* you serve that makes all the difference. And, that difference comes when we place our ultimate allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and service in and to God. Quite frankly, our loyalties to **anything** other than God enslave us in sin. It is only by turning around, repenting, and placing our loyalty in God that we begin to understand what **freedom** really is about. Only then are we liberated to truly live.

We are **all** under sin's domination. But for those baptized into Christ's life, death and resurrection, the **power** of sin has been destroyed. We have been **freed** from sin's power. And the greater **power** that has broken sin's shackles from our lives is God's grace. Through God's unmitigated, unmerited and unrelenting grace, we have been set free from the power of sin. This is not a grace that simply enables us to feel better about ourselves. This is not a grace that simply enables us to live a life after death. No! This is a grace that **pursues** us with God's love. This is a

grace that invades our lives and showers us with God's mercy. This is a grace that transforms us and declares us righteous before God. This is a grace that opens for us the way that leads to a new way of being – the way of God's life, the way of eternal life, the way of life that truly matters right here and right now.

It is grace alone that breaks the chains of sin and safely holds us in the shackles of God's **righteousness**. Freed from the bonds of sin, we are bound irrevocably to God. Paul exclaims, "Thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the **heart**...having been set **free** from sin, [you] have become slaves of righteousness." And, bound to God, we are engaged in the mission of God in the world. Having been freed **from** sin we are freed **for** living into God's mission which begins now! God's mission is here! God's mission is the healing of the world, the wholeness of humanity and the renewal of creation. We **all** get to join that mission, because we have been drafted and enrolled by God's grace.

Friends and followers of Jesus, **we have been captured by Grace and bound to God's righteousness!** Paul tells us we are now living under grace and **not** under the law. And, through baptism into Christ, God has created the possibility of our doing the right thing, but every Christian

must choose whether or not he or she we will do it. We can make choices and decisions to intentionally **live** God's grace because we have been freed **from** the entanglements of the world, the entanglements of self, the entanglements of culture, the entanglements of **anything** that would hold us captive. And, we have been freed to serve, not because we have to but because we **can**, because love flows into love and grace begets grace.

Having been baptized into Christ our ultimate allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and service are now found in God who has made us truly **free!** **That** is the freedom we are joyfully called to celebrate every day. **That** is the freedom we are called to live **into** as we engage in God's mission in this world.