

The Freedom of Belonging to Jesus

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Romans 6: 12-23

Pentecost 4A 2017

So, in addition to being the 4th Sunday of Pentecost, it's also the 4th of July weekend. Just like it is for any country that has won its independence from another country, *freedom* is a big part of our national story. I think that can get lost in all the picnics, parades and fireworks. In my neighborhood, it seems like that freedom is experienced by some as the freedom to set off fireworks whenever I want and wherever I want. And, more generally, freedom often is talked about as the ability to do whatever I want—not having anyone tell me what to do—whether it be the government or your parents.

Freedom is also a central part of our faith story. The Exodus—Moses leading the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land-- is one of our foundational stories. It reminds us who we are and who God is. And, at the very center of our story is being freed from bondage to sin through Jesus and the forgiveness that floods our lives. We are free people—in Christ—free from worrying about whether God loves us enough to forgive us.

So, it is more than a little disturbing to listen to these words from Paul in his letter to the faith community in Rome. It's downright jarring because Paul's main image here is all about *slavery*. And the problem is that Paul doesn't have a problem with slavery.

In his day, slavery was a given. Some estimate that as many as a third of the people in the Roman empire were enslaved people. Some of them were born into slavery. Some became slaves when the Romans conquered their native countries. Some sold themselves into slavery to cover their debts.

In his writings, Paul argues for the kind and decent treatment of slaves but he never questions the institution of slavery—making clear that as inspired as his writings are, he is still an imperfect human being limited by the time he was living in.

We are all shaped by the times in which we have lived—sometimes constricted and sometimes expanded.

Like most people, I am horrified by slavery. I'm someone who would say the movie, *Twelve Years a Slave*, was one of the most important movies I've seen—and I could never see it again. I'm really affected by seeing cruelty. But very recently, I realized that the horrors of harsh treatment of slaves by their masters had distracted me from the horror of the institution itself.

This time, it was a poem rather than a movie that helped me see it. A couple of weeks ago, in our Wednesday night Conversations on Faith and Life, we heard some of the poetry of Marilyn Nelson. One of her poems is about the life of Venture Smith, who was captured as a boy in Ghana, brought to North America as a slave, served for about 30 years under several different masters in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York. Amazingly, he purchased his own freedom, and after that he purchased his children and his wife, and then

he went into the freedom business, saving up money and buying people so he could set them free.

I'm going to read just a few lines from the poem—which is based on Venture Smith's own narrative written in 1795. You can find both on line if you want to read more.

“Yes, everything I own is dearly bought, / but gratitude is a never-emptying cup, / my life equal measures pain and windfall. . . . For one thirty years enslaved, I have done well. / I am free and clear; not one penny do I owe. / I own myself—a five-hundred-dollar man— / and two thousand dollars' worth of family. / Of canoes and boats, right now I own twenty-nine. / Seventy acres of bountiful land is mine. / God or gods, thanks for raining these blessings on me. / I turn around slowly. I own everything I scan.”

Hearing these words—hearing the price of people in a list of other property like boats and land—just got to me at a different level. What it means to be owned by another person—and then to be able to buy yourself—buy your freedom.

So, I looked for some other narratives from people who had been enslaved and then purchased their own freedom. And one of the things I learned was that just because a man had saved up enough money to buy himself, it didn't mean that the master had to sell him. The decision about whether the enslaved man could buy his freedom was always in the hands of the master.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor and theologian known for his resistance to the Nazis, says that we are not self-made; we become a new humanity in Christ.

Paul would say that we're going to be slaves of someone or something. He says we can be slaves of righteousness—which is another way of saying slaves of God or we can be slaves of something else.

In Paul's view, it's all about where your ultimate loyalty is—where your lay-your-life-on-the-line allegiance is. What is it that drives your life? Where is your energy directed? What gets you up in the morning, keeps you going through the day, and allows you to sleep at night—or if you can't sleep, what keeps you awake?

That is your master—your lord.

Opioids or alcohol could be my master. But so could fashion or physical fitness or a perfectly ordered home. My master could even be well-balanced children who get along with each other or financial security or good health. I think my master could even be a church.

The point is that there are a lot of things—even some good things—that vie with Jesus to be Lord and master of our lives. One of the great challenges most of us have is that we compartmentalize our faith. We let Jesus be the Lord of part of our lives but we hold on to others. We want to be in charge of those parts—I guess because we think Jesus doesn't

have much to say about them or maybe more honestly, we're afraid of what he would say. We don't want anyone—including Jesus—to tell us what to do.

Paul is trying to tell us that we don't know what we are missing—that, in the words of one theologian, “there are loyalties that liberate.”

Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery in Maryland. She describes the moment she crossed into the free state of Pennsylvania: “When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.”

Paul understands baptism the same way. Through baptism, we become—not only part of the body of Christ that is the church—we become part of Christ. We are “in Christ”. We go through a status change that is as magnificent as the one Harriet Tubman describes.

There is no one who would not describe Harriet Tubman as a driven woman. For me, she is the quintessential example of what it looks like when you are enslaved by God. She was compelled to return to Maryland to lead her family members and others to freedom. As precious as her own freedom was, she risked it at least 19 times to help others escape.

Tubman had a powerful, lively relationship with God. She said, “I always told God, I'm going to hold steady on you, and you've got to see me through.”

That was the story line that ran through her entire life—from the time she was born in slavery to the day she died in a New York home she founded for free elderly Black men and women. Freedom for Tubman, was not about having no one tell her what to do. Freedom was about being able to follow a higher calling—being able to follow God's call on her life—come what may.

Few of us are as free as Harriet Tubman—I know I am not. But I long to be.

And the Good News for us is that the decision about who we belong to is ultimately the Master's. We belong to Jesus. That is our story.

Yes, we have our other masters, those other things that vie for ultimate loyalty in our lives. We spend a lot of our day living like those other lords are in charge. But the Holy Spirit is working on us. We are growing and changing and being transformed—and we are tasting the freedom of being enslaved to God—and when we do, just like Paul and Harriet said, it is like heaven on earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.