

“Slavery & Freedom”

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – June 28, 2020

N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman

Sermon Text: Romans 6:12-23

What dictates our choices, big and small, moment by moment, year by year till they all add up to who we are – to ourselves and to others?

I turn this week to what is offered among the lectionary passages and am again strangely drawn to Paul’s Letter to the Church at Rome. It is as if these past several Sundays Paul is trying to grab our attention, deliberately confronting us as if our lives depended upon it. Maybe they do.

Turning to Paul’s words today not with a joyful heart, but one convicted. Drawn perhaps because of some deep desire for release, relief from what is going on in our world and feeling overwhelmed, weak and vulnerable. Knowing that we are called to live differently. Praying for clarity and strength for myself and others to make it through this time, to come out a better people. Tough stuff for tough times – to face the reality that if we don’t confront some things and change some of our ways it’s going to get worse, not better.

Convicted. Not totally, but enough to make me face where, as an individual I have “slipped” and where, as a people we have “fallen.” There are times in life, as individuals or as a group, that simply peel back the masks we wear, that snatch at our outerwear, strip us and force us to stand unclothed from all pretense before a full-length mirror to face the image reflected in it. Such are the times we are in now. Do we dare to do this, to face the mirror dropped in front of us? Do we dare to really open our eyes to the realities that stare back at us from our reflection? Do we dare to do something about what we see there, to change the distortions in the image that confronts us?

Paul speaks truth on a timeless theme: sin and salvation. Paul is the biblical poster child for sin and salvation. He has earned the right to talk about both. His turnabout on the road to Damascus is a Biblical classic. When the image of who he thought he was and what was his to do shattered into a thousand pieces as Christ’s voice struck him to the ground. “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see” could be the theme song of Paul’s life. A sinner saved, but even after, still struggling.

The road from sin to salvation is slippery, rocky, washed out in places, never level for long, an up and down again and again way. So often, one step forward and more steps backward, because the past has a way of luring us back. Good or bad, it is familiar. And the way forward is not.

We may imagine the road to Damascus and Paul’s journey along it a straight line, but the journey we call life is not. The roadway we travel in life presents constant cross-roads where we must make continual choices as to the direction we will go. What directs those choices? What voices, internal and external, hold sway over those choices? What, to use Paul’s term, exercises

“dominion” over us. Under whose authority do we find ourselves? What or who, to use another of Paul’s terms, enslaves us – exercises power, control dominion over us?

Sin and salvation are paired with the theme of slavery and freedom in today’s reading. Slavery vs. freedom is a theme not just prevalent in the first century but our twenty-first. Actually it is a constant thread running throughout all of human history.

How can we define sin for our conversation today? How about this: sin is when we humans exercise our own will in disregard to God’s will. Basically, what the Adam/Eve/Apple/God story offers early on at the dawn of humankind. Sin becomes an orientation to life when we allow our will to exercise dominion over us. Sin binds us to it. Sin rules over us. Sin dominates us. Sin enslaves us. Our will in turn is fed by trying to dominate others. Back to the Adam/Eve/story we discover the reality that when we choose to act on our own will in disregard of God’s will we find ourselves outside the Garden (God’s plan for harmony and abundance for all creation). We have exiled ourselves from it by our behavior. Add the story of Adam and Eve’s children, Cain and Able and we find that exercising our own will and succumbing to the passion that can fuel that will, we can become instruments of destruction over even our own kind, destroying life to feed a willful human ego that has run amok. Destroying human life, something God has created.

The prophet Micah speaks God’s words with the question, “What does God require of us?” The response, “To do justice, love kindness/mercy and walk humbly with God.” What is the greatest commandment someone asks Jesus? His response, “To love the Lord your God with all you heart, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Justice, mercy, love, humility – the way of God. The way God designed for human life: abundance and length of life, even beyond physical death. With tragic results we fall so short of the Divine requirement for life.

Race relations is a topic that confronts us so starkly today. We must confront it, face ourselves in the mirror that has been placed in front of all of us. A mirror framed in black and white. It is a tragic confrontation that unmask us, that fuels passions in ways that can destroy life, not enhance it. Black/white is the visible issue. The issue is tragically not just skin deep, not only a black/white race issue, but a human race issue. The black/white issue is an outward visible sign of a deeply rooted inward sin to which we have become a host. A virus called willfulness that has infected our whole human race and wants to destroy whatever in life threatens it.

Something to confront: the stark reality that we are all enslaved by what has infected us and disordered life. The sin of an egoic will that wants to dominate, exercise dominion over us, steal us away from the God that created us, loves, and sustains us. God’s goal is to sustain life; sin’s goal is to destroy that God given life. Sin uses our passions to fuel its goals, as Paul points out. The way of sin is to divide and conquer, to separate us from each other and tear us apart and isolate us from one another and from God. The way of God is to love and harmonize what has been created individually and variously by design to form the beautiful abundance that God purposed from the beginning. God’s design for human race relations is not an over and under

way of life with each other, but a side by side one. One of justice, mercy, love, kindness, and humility, each with the other and with the One who created life and calls us to be instruments of the love that nourishes and sustains life, not instruments that diminish and destroy life.

Going forward from this moment in the history of the human race what do we want the mirror of our life to reflect? What will we choose to dictate our choices, big and small, moment by moment, year by year to add up to who we are? Will our life fall under the dominion of sin which wants to enslave all of us, exercise its power over us? Or will we, slowly perhaps but surely, seek and find freedom from sin? Allow our life to be powered instead by love, to walk humbly side by side with each other under the power of Divine guidance and love!

By amazing Grace, may we become instruments of Divine love and grace, free to be and to channel both into a hurting, waiting world . . .

Torrence