

Grace and Freedom II

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Romans 7:15-25a and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

On July 5, 1852, 168 years ago this morning, Frederick Douglass delivered a speech, an oration, in Rochester, New York, entitled “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Douglass, a former slave, politician, journalist, activist, was the prominent Black voice of the nineteenth century; his legacy permeates all that is happening now. Douglass’ Independence Day speech resides, along with King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and a handful of other works, in the pantheon of transformative American rhetoric. You might spend time this afternoon, July 5, COVID 2020, Googling it and reading it.

Here’s a very brief excerpt: “Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery – the great sin and shame of America!”

*In the name of liberty, which is fettered*, Douglass said. Fettered liberty, enslaved liberty, bounded liberty, which meant that liberty wasn’t really liberty at all, certainly for those who were enslaved, and, I would argue, for those who enslaved them.

We continue to explore Romans, Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. The point then, as now, is captured in a later Bob Dylan song – “You’re Gonna Have to Serve Somebody.” For Paul, using the language and imagery of slavery, you were either a slave to sin, and death, or you were a slave to Jesus Christ. You either *served* death, and sin, and every implication of that servitude, or you served God. This is of course massively different than any consideration of enslaved Africans, who had no choice – sin *or* Jesus – for the living of their days. But Douglass’ phrase – “liberty which is fettered” – does resonate with Paul, and can, to Douglass’ understanding and ours, suggest both physical slavery and spiritual slavery.

That is to say, Paul’s theology is hollow and flawed if it does not lead to an ethic, morality, we will call it, righteousness, Paul called it. If we serve sin and death, it is so much easier to embrace practices and beliefs that dehumanize ourselves and others. Once we have embraced, by faith, the grace of Jesus, once we have cast off our servitude to sin and death, we serve grace, serve righteousness. And in service, which replaces one set of obligations with another, we experience true and perfect freedom, unfettered liberty.

Paul understands human nature. “...I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” We make choices, every day, dozens, hundreds of times a day. Some are mundane – what we will eat, what we will wear. Some are less than mundane – how we will spend our time, our money, how we will nurture our children, how we will participate in the world. Paul understands

human nature, in that by choosing death, sin, our choices are bad – not just “I know I shouldn’t have a second dessert” bad, but at a deeper level, who we are at our core. We might not think of it as evil, as did Paul, and we may not think, like Paul, that there is a war inside of us, for our minds, our hearts, our souls. Sin and death, *or* Jesus. That might not be the way we would understand it, but we certainly understand the pull of bad choices, the slippery slope of the wrong thing. Or worse. And the collective impact of it all, a kind of mob mentality of sinfulness that can take over and that has led us in part to our present moment. Paul understands all of that, and for him, freedom from that, freedom toward a new thing, comes through grace, the grace of Jesus, which leads us away from sin and toward a new life, a righteous life, for each and for all.

We chafe, as Americans, as Christians, when we are told what to do, or not to do, when we are restricted, constricted, in any way. That’s in part why this quarantine, this self-imposed lockdown, is so hard. But this is not about what color socks we will wear, or Coke or Pepsi. This is about choices at a deeper level, true freedom, real accountability and obligation. That is why Paul believes that God gave us the law.

David Lose writes: “We tend to think of law negatively because we experience it as enforcing something we do not want. But for Paul, the primary purpose of the law is to urge us toward life, toward that which is healthful, life-giving, and of true value ... even when we, lured by immediate desires, would rather seize those things which lead to death.” Lose continues: “For Paul, this tug between what is right and what is immediately gratifying is not only descriptively accurate of the tension-filled nature of human existence, it also points to our need for help, for encouragement, for forgiveness and, ultimately, for God.”

So we chafe at the law, at perceptions that our freedom is curtailed, even though we know in our souls that we are prone to make bad choices, the things that lead to death. But the law is more than a negative thing, preventing us from the bad.

John Calvin considered the ethical value of the law, its goodness, sometimes called the “third use of the law,” the first being that it teaches us our sin and the second being that it helps maintain civil order, preventing bad things.

Elsie Anne McKee writes that “For Calvin, the ‘third’ and principal use of the law is to serve Christians as a pattern for love, as a guide to the right way to love God and their neighbors. This third use is not simply a series of do’s and don’ts; it encompasses a whole way of life. The two tables of the law (love God, love neighbor) can never be independent of each other, and thus socioeconomic matters are conditioned by, and even subsumed under, the primary service of God. ...social and economic behavior is neither an autonomous sphere of human life, not just an optional addendum; it is a vital part of the Christian worship of God.” (“The Character and Significance of John Calvin’s Teaching on Social and Economic Issues,” page 6)

The law as a pattern for love. That means we love God not just on a Sunday morning when we are singing hymns and praying prayers, but we love God when we vote, when we choose how to spend our money, when we engage public life. And if the law is about cultivating good even

more than preventing bad, we not only work to end bad behaviors in our own lives and bad systems in the world, we work for good behaviors in our own lives and just systems in the world.

In Calvin's own words: "...all violence, injury, and any harmful thing at all that may injure our neighbor's body are forbidden to us. We are accordingly commanded if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbors' lives, faithfully to employ it: if there is anything that makes for their peace, to see to it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in any danger, to lend a helping hand...Therefore this law also forbids murder of the heart, and enjoying the inner intent to save a brother's life..." (*Institutes* 2.8.40)

We know that murder of the body serves sin and death; to Calvin, so does murder of the heart. On Independence Day 2020, that remains important, more than just visiting an arcane theology from the 1500's.

Who are we as people of faith in this place, in this moment? How are we saving our neighbors' lives? Is liberty fettered or unfettered, in our own hearts and souls, and in the hearts and souls and lives of our neighbors?

You can look at the headlines or scroll through your phone at any moment and ask the question. The topics will change – in this moment it's a global pandemic and racial justice, masks and monuments.

But the underlying vision is timeless – how are we manifesting the love of God that we have experienced in the life of our neighbors and in the life of the world? And to be reminded, continually, that our tendency to sin, to make wrong choices, is mitigated by the better news that grace gives us the freedom to make the right one. Because we serve grace, we are freed to love. As Calvin wrote nearly 500 years ago, we do not obey "because we are compelled by the constraint of the law but (we) are freely obedient to the will of God after being released from the yoke of the law." The law, a gift of grace, frees us to serve.

And of that yoke...Preaching to a crowd, Jesus made incarnate what Paul articulated. He embodied the perfect freedom of grace, even as he embodied perfect servanthood. And he invited us to share in that vision.

In the service where I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister, almost 31 years ago (!), I was charged by a dear friend, a colleague of my dad's, a minister whose service with the poor of our community remains a model to me. The Rev. William Briggs, of blessed memory, said some words that I vaguely remember, to be honest, and he gave me this, a handmade yoke. It remains of great sentimental and vocational and spiritual value.

"Come to me," Jesus said, "all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

We have choices. Obligations. Responsibilities and accountabilities. To put on the yoke of grace is to be freed, liberated, unbound, unfettered, for joyous service, service that on Independence Day 2020, will transform your heart and soul, and transform the world. Amen.