

Sermon (7/2/17, Romans 6: 12-23):

Next week, my family and I plan to spend several days at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia as part of our vacation time together.

Colonial Williamsburg, for those of you unfamiliar with it, is a restored village reflecting life as it was in the early days of our nation when it was a British Colony, just before our declaration of independence. It has restored homes, businesses, the palace from which the English Governor ruled, the house of Burgesses, and a place where soldiers were trained and munitions were stored.

Populating this historic village is a rather large community of reenactors embodying everyone from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to a shoemaker, a farmer, and slaves. In the course of a week, they condense the historic progression that took place as Williamsburg moved from being a British Colony to declaring its independence, which is what we celebrate each July 4<sup>th</sup> and the reason why we see so many tents selling fireworks along Columbia Turnpike!

One thing I've noticed over the years is a greater effort to educate people about the African Americans who were sadly a part of the enslaved community.

During one of our first visits, when our children were very young and the story of African American slaves was not so prevalent, we happened upon a slave reenactor sitting on a tree stump in the backyard of one of the houses. It was quite a memorable experience. First, he talked to us in character but then he broke out of character to tell us about the critical contribution the enslaved community made. With great passion and heart, he described how the sweat and labors of the slave community played a significant role in cultivating the roots of our nation. I will never forget this man.

As part of our national history, slavery remains a painful wound. It's a word that recalls a social evil we very much would like to put behind us. It is for this reason that today's passage can be difficult. The word 'slave' that Paul uses with frequency is something that appropriately triggers our offenses. For Paul, however, it was sadly a normal part of language and a metaphor that was easily accessible in his day when slavery was common.

While, today, we continue the struggle to rid ourselves of this historic plight, making an effort to get past Paul's usage of this word is important so that we can access the deeper truth he is trying to convey. He is reminding us that, in one way or another, we are all controlled by some type of force that influences what we do, how we think, and what we say. As much as freedom is a cherished hallmark of our nation, we remain a people who tend to be subjugated to the rule of some type of Master whether that Master be fear, greed, addictions, societal and peer pressure, current ideals of success, racism, hopelessness, or even warped visions of inferiority and worthlessness. A good exercise for us to undertake is to reflect on what occupies our thoughts and how we spend our time and money. The conclusion we reach will give us a hint as to what controls and possesses us.

When I was in High School, the opinion of my peers tended to control a lot of my life – it controlled the clothes I wore, the language I used, and the things I liked and didn't like. The idea of standing out as different was terrifying because it would surely make you a target of much mocking and ridicule.

As adults, we want to be liked, maybe even admired, so we spend our days trying to do and say the right thing that will garner the approval of others.

We often succumb to those market forces that convey the message that we are what we own until we slowly become owned by what we supposedly own. It's something we're wrestling with right now in our church as we struggle with our aging buildings whose needs seem to possess us more than we possess them.

We want to feel secure even as we find it increasingly elusive to satisfy this demanding Master.

In our desire to belong, we succumb to ideologies and charismatic leaders while cutting ourselves off from all dialog with the contrary other.

Bob Dylan once wrote a song entitled, 'Gotta Serve Somebody'. *You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride. Says one of its verses. You may be a councilman taking bribes on the side. You may be workin in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair. You may be somebody's lady,*

*may be somebody's heir. Still, you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes, you're gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

After reading Paul's passage today, we might conclude that Paul would have been a Dylan fan. In it, Paul argues that, in the end, we're going to serve somebody. The question is who. Sin or God?

Very often, when we hear the word 'sin', we reduce it to our own transgressions by which we will ultimately be judged. For Paul, the definition of sin is much broader than that. Sin, for Paul, is a powerful force which we humans are unable to contest on our own. We cannot free ourselves from sin any more than the Hebrew people could free themselves from Pharaoh's chains in Egypt. Sin is sly, deceptive, controlling, brutal and we, on our own, are no match for it.

We are not on our own, however, Paul contends. Similar to how God sent Moses to free the Hebrew people from Pharaoh's chains, God has sent Jesus to free us from sin's powerful control over our lives. Because of what Jesus has done, we now have a choice. A choice we did not have before. A choice to either serve the master called sin or serve God in Christ.

Once Moses came, the Hebrew people had a choice...they could either stay slaves of the Pharaoh or risk following Moses out of Egypt to a new land God promised them. Either way they would be serving somebody but whom they chose to serve would make all the difference.

To serve sin, Paul says, leads to death. To serve God leads to life.

So, what does it mean to choose God and, thereby, choose life? Does it mean everything will be easy and smooth sailing? Does it mean we will never make mistakes and suffer their consequences? Does it mean we can just go on living as we have always lived? Consider this.

First, to serve God means to follow God just as the Hebrew people followed Moses. And to follow means learning new things and shaping one's life around these new things. It means being attentive to God's guidance and following the signs that God lays out for us that leads to life. For us, I think that begins by investing ourselves in a faith community. It means celebrating both our unity and diversity. It means choosing to

believe that we are God's beloved, as these baptismal waters declare, instead of believing the other demeaning things that define us in daily life. It means choosing to live with the hope that God is not done with us and God can and will use us to be a means of healing in this sorely broken world. It means eating together and being nourished at the communion table no matter how estranged we might be before we get here. It means deepening our understanding of the Biblical story which gives us insight and wisdom into what it means to belong to God. It is not just about being freed from sin, it's also about being freed to do something - to live in a covenantal relationship of love and grace with God and with neighbor.

Second. It is not easy. Jesus never promised it would be. In fact, if anything, it tends to take us to places of danger just as Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing he would soon be arrested and crucified.

Nor does it preclude us from faltering and even falling. This is part of what it means to be human but being owned by God means believing that God's grace is always greater than our messes.

Finally, knowing and experiencing the life that comes with serving God can only be fully realized when we make the decision to leave Egypt behind. Keeping one foot in Egypt and one foot on the path to life just doesn't work. The Hebrew people tried that in the wilderness and it got them into a mess. A conscious, deliberate choice is the only way out and making the choice to subject our lives to Christ inevitably requires change. Changing our priorities, our lifestyles, our sense of what is important and not so important, how we use our resources, and even our sense of identity. To be sure this change is challenging but it comes with the territory of choosing whom we will serve.

I think Bob Dylan got it right. We shouldn't deceive ourselves – one way or another, we gotta serve somebody. Paul's question is whom will it be. To choose rightly makes all the difference...

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.