

Proper 8, Year A - 4th Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2017
Romans 6:12-23
The Rev. Carenda Baker

In today's passage from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Paul tackles a sticky issue that is near and dear to our hearts. It is a dynamic that affects us daily – the true nature of freedom. Contemporary Americans and maybe even most of humanity operate under two misconceptions about freedom. The first is that serving self is freedom. That is, freedom is about doing whatever we want, whenever we want, however we want. The second misconception is that serving God means a loss of freedom, because being obedient to anyone or anything is life-constricting, confining, self-limiting. These two misconceptions lead us to believing that if we are lucky enough, or strong or bold or beautiful or powerful or rich enough, we can live without obligations, commitments, or any requirements whatsoever. This is by and large the contemporary understanding of freedom, and is for many the American ideal of freedom. But this is a notion of freedom that is debilitating and destructive for us individually, for every community of faith, and for the greater common good of all people.

Listen to Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson's rendering of several verses of this Roman's passage:

“ . . . Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time – remember, you've been raised from the dead! – into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God. . . Offer yourselves to the ways of God and the freedom never quits. All your lives you've let sin tell you what to do. But thank God you've started listening to a new master, one whose commands set you free to live openly in his freedom!”

The notion of being a slave or beholden to someone does not sit very well with us. Slavery is a powerful and distasteful metaphor. The myth of personal independence is a deeply entrenched idol of our modern age. According to the apostle Paul, human beings are never **NOT** under obligation to something. The question is not whether you will follow something or someone, but what or who you will follow. Will you follow your passions or self-control? Will you follow ambition or integrity and honor? Will you follow the promises you've made to a relationship, or believe yourself exempt from those requirements?

Paul invites the Christians in Rome and us, to consider that the choice before us is not whether to be obedient or free, but to choose to what we will be freely obedient. In that classic rock song of Bob Dylan's – no matter who we are or what our life circumstances, “You [we] Gotta Serve Somebody”. Human nature tends to slide toward whatever seems easiest in the short run. Giving up short term gratification for long term happiness is hard. So Paul says, God has granted us the freedom in Christ to strive for things that bring long term happiness and eternal blessing. Paul believes that God has granted us the power to want to reach for something deeper, something more than our surroundings or culture offers.

We have been freed in Christ to give ultimate loyalty to God in every aspect of our lives – work, leisure, care of our body, mind, and spirit, relationships, money, sexuality, politics, service, learning, use of our time, care of creation. It is hard to offer this kind of total allegiance to God. It's much easier to pick and choose, to compartmentalize in what areas we will let God speak to and direct us. At some point, living faithful to God will clash with where the larger culture around us wants us to pledge our trust and loyalty – to the nation, to the economy, to immediate self-gratification.

This is why it is so important for us periodically to renew our baptismal promises. Baptism is the turning point that names our new identity, names who we are – children of God, who have been buried in Christ's death and raised in his resurrection "to walk in newness of life". Our loyalty is spoken for at the moment of baptism, when we are pledged to God, "sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."

So how can we grow deeper and stronger in claiming this freedom given by God? How do we move away from sin, and move closer to loving and serving God and others with faithfulness?

Barbara Hutchinson, the rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Shippensburg, gave a talk during Lent, 2016 on how to deepen our relationship with God. With deep gratitude and respect I share here much of what she said to that group. She began by describing those things that help us develop a deeper relationship with a person we care about or are interested in building a friendship with. We set time aside to be with them. We are attentive. We speak and listen. We show a willingness to share our secrets – to be ourselves without false pretense, being vulnerable enough to show the not so pretty parts of ourselves. It is a relief to be accepted and loved, "warts and all" by another person. We focus on speaking the truth in love to the other person. And often, we deepen the bonds by sharing a meal together. And for these very important relationships in our lives, we try to keep tabs. We remain attentive so we know when the relationship might be starting to drift, slip away, or get off track.

We can engage in these very same practices to grow deeper in our relationship with God. To do these things intentionally is to develop what in the monastic tradition is known as a "Rule of Life".

- The first thing we do is set time aside to be present to God daily, and weekly in worship. God will always be there, but it does make a difference how often we show up with the intention to be in God's presence. The daily practice could be contemplative prayer, praying the Daily Office, or using a devotional like "Forward Day by Day".
- We spend time listening for God. In the Rule of St. Benedict, the first word is "listen" - listen with the ear of your heart. So we listen to God, not just for answers to our questions, but to hear the questions God has for us. If it has not been your practice to listen for God, a first step might be to aim to spend half your prayer time speaking and the other half listening.

- There is the sharing of our inner “secrets” with God. A good place to begin is by ending the day with what is called a “prayer of examen”. We begin simply by recalling the times during the day when we got it “right”: when we built up another person through encouragement or honest praise. Or saw a need and immediately moved to meet it. Or when we recognized grace and our heart was turned in compassion to another. The second step, a bit harder one, is to recall the times when we fell short of love: when we felt anger and didn’t stop and think before we spoke. A time when we weren’t really attentive to someone speaking to us. A moment when we fell into the temptation to gossip. Or an encounter that might have been disturbing or frustrating and we didn’t know what to do about it. These are the things to share with God at the end of the day, and to ask for clarity and renewed strength, remembering that “always we begin again”.
- And then there is sharing a meal together. We gather as God’s people, recalling the Last Supper and Jesus’ self-giving. We offer our praise and thanksgiving as we share in the gifts of God in bread and wine, joining in the mystery of Christ’s body and blood given for us. And we offer our own response to God’s goodness by saying “Thank you” and “I love you.” Some days we will come to the table needing the strength of others. Some days we will come with extra strength to offer those in need. This is what God’s people do, come together as God’s beloved to be fed and nourished and reminded of the presence of God in this gathered community.

A “rule of life” is not about rigidly following “rules”. It is an intentional pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. This growth in holiness (the biblical and theological word is “sanctification”) happens as we deepen our relationship with God and with each other. Growth in holiness can help us love each other more, draw us together into a community committed to reconciliation, and strengthen us to offer hope to the world.

A rule of life is a *realistic plan*. It makes sense not to set the bar too high lest we become discouraged if we are unable quickly to meet the goal. Developing spiritual disciplines takes time and practice and patience as we make them part of the fabric of our life. It is a lifetime journey we are on with God, learning to live into freedom from sin, freedom for love and service. As Martin Luther said: Baptism is a once and for all sacrament that takes the whole rest of our lives to complete. A rule of life is not an “add on” or a way to measure whether we are making a passing or failing grade with God. A rule of life is a way to provide structure to our spiritual life so that we can be open to the new life God offers us, and is always calling us toward.

Here is a bit of a homework assignment for the coming week: Write out what you are currently doing to keep your relationship with God and significant others in your life strong and deep. Then reflect, imagine, and ask God what would help make your relationship with God and others even better.

God wants to help us sort out where we may not be living in that freedom of new life in Christ that was declared in our baptism. We may still have habits, compulsions, negative and anxious thought patterns, guilt, addictions from which we still need to experience release. We can be slaves to a whole host of things. But the good news has been declared: the power of sin and death has been broken - forever.

You will have the opportunity in just a few moments to receive healing prayers. You are invited to come confidently, knowing that God desires to give you all that you need to walk faithfully, to claim the freedom in Christ that is already yours. Come, trusting that God is already at work in you through Christ to bring healing and wholeness, love and light. Let us bow to give thanks at the table, as we are nourished in the banquet of freedom and grace.

It's true: we all "gotta serve somebody". So, in the words of Eugene Peterson: "Now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way". This is true freedom. And this is good news!