

Pentecost 4th Sunday “Whom Do You Serve?” Romans 6 18

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

Paul used such greetings. In Paul’s introduction of his letter to the Church in Philippi, he said:

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

This applies well to you, the people of Redeemer and me, as God’s doulos, bringing to you God’s gifts. I pray for you, and you for me. I take great joy in you for your love and our partnership in the Gospel. And I have great confidence in you, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ!

1 Peter 4:10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:

Matthew 20:28 Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 23:11 The greatest among you shall be your servant.

In our Epistle reading today, we are picking up in the middle of Paul’s argument. We need to review what happened earlier. Paul has been explaining his ministry and message by expounding on the Gospel. In chapter 3 he summarized it with his famous section which begins at verse 21 and concludes at verse 27. He says salvation is a gift, apprehended through faith. In chapter 4 he makes an argument through the example of Abraham who was counted as righteous before God, even before he was circumcised. Chapter 5 is the fuller explanation of the main point. We heard that last week.

Here in chapter 6 Paul carries on a conversation through a series of questions and answers. Earlier in the chapter the questioner wondered if since God forgives sins, let's sin more and get more forgiveness. Paul's answer that is that since we were baptized into Christ, our very nature has changed. We are no longer those old sinners.

Our Epistle reading picks up with his concluding paragraph of that first question. We do not present our bodies for sinful purposes. That is just not who we are since our Baptism. We present ourselves to God as people who have been redeemed. Sin no longer has its dominion over us.

In the second paragraph of our text, Paul asks another similar question. Since we are no longer under the law but under grace, can we sin with impunity? Is grace a license to do whatever we want? "By no means!" thunders Paul. His argument is two-fold. First of all, you are a slave of the one you serve. If you serve sin, you are a slave to it. If you serve righteousness, and God is righteousness itself, you are His slave. Notice, that absolute freedom is just not one of the options. You are going to serve someone or something.

Serving God is the better service because it leads to life and holiness. We call that sanctification. Serving sin **feels** like a sort of freedom. We are indeed free from the demands of righteousness, but it leads to death and damnation. Paul is essentially comparing 'benefits packages' here and noting that the benefits for the slaves of God are much better than the benefits for the slaves of sin.

What is amazing, in Paul's eyes, is that we get to choose our slavery. When were slaves to sin, we had no option. We were stuck. Baptism has opened up options for us. We can run back to that old slavery, it is true. Baptism does not erase our freedom, but it is a liberation to serve God. We can turn our back on that service and return to the old service. But Paul is pretty sure we won't like that.

Unfortunately, the imagery of slavery here often puts people off. Since the great abolitionist movement of the mid-19th century, we have had a visceral rejection of slavery woven into our culture. We have embraced liberty and freedom as virtues. One has to remember that at the time of Paul, some 25% or more of the population were slaves.

No one tried to be a slave, but it was also not something which was always and especially shameful. It is true that many slaves were terribly treated, but others were not. Slavery was not racial, but economic. Bankruptcy could result in you and your family being sold into slavery. The ancient people enslaved vulnerable people; often the losers in war were enslaved. Lots of people you saw on the street were slaves.

As it turns out, being a servant of God is the most freeing thing a person can be and brings joy in all circumstances. And contrary to the arguments of some parents who want to “wait until their children can make their own decision,” we should be baptizing infants so they actually have a choice.

Lots of people feel like their lives are out of their control. They are under the influence of “forces” which often govern them or enslave them. Addictions are only the most obvious example. There are many other more subtle examples: a mortgage that forces us to work a job we hate, a bad childhood that we can blame for our poor relational skills, mental illnesses that render us unaccountable for our actions, or pain that simply makes us crabby – all manners of enslavement!

This makes for a challenge for us to understand, but I think we would do well just take the bull by the horns. We are all slaves of something. Baptism has given us the chance to be slaves of God, a much preferable slavery.

As Paul says, I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul concludes this section by admitting that, previously, righteousness was not a concern. Since we were slaves of sin, unrighteousness was our command, but the fruit was rotten, shameful, and ultimately led to death. But we have been set free from sin and God is our new master. Life in His service leads to sanctification and eternal life in Jesus Christ. Death was the wage paid by our previous master, but God gives us the free gift of life—now and forever. God be praised!

In the church, in our divine service, we are given the chance to find our true identities as children of the heavenly Father. He created us each as unique, each endowed with individual gifts to use in His kingdom, with a purpose to be discovered in Him and through Him by searching God's Word.

We become heart-obeying slaves. Through the Word entering our ears, carrying with it the Holy Spirit down into hearts, creating the faith that saves us, not by works, but by grace. And we now can serve God, as often we pray, God "give us the desire to obey your commandments." But before we even have a chance to obey Him, or serve Him, He has already saved us through Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection for us.

God in Christ Jesus has saved you. He will preserve you and He will preserve His church, and even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

And the best news of all is that despite the fact that we fail in our service to Him, despite the fact that we return to the very sins that we confess and repent from, He is faithful to continue bringing us forgiveness, life and salvation through the means of grace, every time we return to hear his Word, to remember our adoption in Holy Baptism, to receive the declaration of our forgiveness, to take and eat and drink the bread and wine, the very body and blood of our Lord and Savior. Taste and hear that the Lord is Good.

And may the Love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting.