

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/29/2008, Pentecost 7A
Romans 6:12-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is Romans 6:13, from this morning's Epistle Lesson. It is a verse that speaks of our "members," which means our bodies and all their parts: our limbs and tummies and lips and so on. St. Paul says this:

Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men [and women, boys and girls] who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. (Romans 6:13, RSV)

What a sweet word we have in this text — the word "yield": "Do not *yield* your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but *yield* yourselves to God..." It is a word that supposes we have a say in the matter. It is a word that credits us with strength and with Christian dignity — with strength enough to order our own lives and with dignity enough to order our lives well. That little word, "yield," speaks of our Christian freedom. It imagines that we have power to reject sin, yea to overthrow its reign in our lives, which would be a blessed rebellion indeed. It supposes that you and I are able to turn away from sin and that if we do not, we can blame it only on our own "listlessness," to use the phrase of St. John Chrysostom. That is, if we do not resist sin, in the end it is only because we are not trying hard enough.

Note that the apostle speaks of the one who "reigns" in our life. He is not speaking of a puppeteer, who pulls the wires and controls our lives. Indeed, there is no puppeteer! That is Paul's point. Paul is not speaking of one whose rule is irresistibly imposed on our lives, but rather, he is speaking of the one to whom we give our loyalty. Be loyal to Jesus, not to sin. Give your heart to Christ and forsake your former allegiance to sin. Yield yourselves to God.

The main force of this morning's reading is in the direction of Christian freedom. The apostle would have us be free men and women, boys and girls, rather than being slaves to sin. And so, St. Paul makes this appeal to us:

¹⁶Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to *any one* as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?(Romans 6:16, RSV)

A few weeks back, Carol and I visited friends down in Virginia, near Charlottesville. We visited Monticello, which I had long wanted to see, and we visited Manassas, which was one of the Civil War battlefields. There was a Civil War museum there, and it was very interesting — heartbreaking, really, to think about those days of war, all the death, all the wounds and infections. One of the plain and plausible historical observations made by the museum was that the ultimate Union victory was hard on both the Confederate plantation owners *and* on the slaves. That it would be hard on the plantation owners made perfect sense. But I had not thought much about the suffering for the emancipated slave.

But, of course, there must have been suffering for the former slave. What did he have? What did she have? They had little education and little experience with commerce. They had vocational training in the crafts and work appropriate to the plantation, and only for a few of them would those plantation skills translate into jobs out in the world. They had no real estate, no house, no farm animals. What did they have?

Well, I can tell you one thing they had: they had release from their lifelong terror that they would be separated from their families. For that is one part of what it means to be a slave. It means that your master has the power to separate you from your loved ones. He can sell you away or sell your family away.

When Frederick Douglass finally escaped from his Maryland slave master, you never find him wanting to go back to his slavery. His master or his mistress might have been kind to him, and the comforts of the Baltimore house might have been greater than the poor comforts of the woods and marshes and the hide-away places Douglass endured as he made his escape north. But you never find Douglass weighing things and deciding to go back to Baltimore. A human being is worth more than that. You are worth more than that. Slavery is unworthy of you.

And St. Paul urges us to be free men and women in this world. Baptism was *our* Civil War. It was our emancipation from slavery to sin. Baptism was our rebellion and liberation from that slave-master sin. Do not now creep back into slavery, Paul urges us. Let us seek to defend and to enlarge our freedom. Do not let sin, that cruel slave master, diminish our options and threaten to separate us from our loved ones again. Fie on addictions, fie on laziness, fie on lust. Those slave masters are illegitimate for us. They have threatened us and our loved ones far too long.

Fleeing sin and expanding our freedom is our duty under Christ, for, as St. Paul puts it,

¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.(1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

We have a fascinating idea here: “We are not our own. We were bought with a price.” For all the world, it sounds as if St. Paul is speaking of slavery. Aye, and he is! But in the end, the apostle is speaking of slavery to God. We are not our own, but were bought with a price. We belong to God, who is the best Master we could ever have in this world.

As St. Paul sees it, to be a human being is to be built for slavery. The question before each of us is, “Slavery to whom?” Paul places two masters before us: slavery to sin or slavery to God. Choose God, and in the process choose life and freedom.

And so, for the sake of your loved ones and for your own sake, seek always to defend and expand your freedom. Choose Jesus and his ways, and in choosing him, expand your freedom in life.

Let me speak first with you children and young people of the parish. This is what your parents want for you. They want you to enjoy freedom. And that is why, for example, they send you off to bed in the nighttime earlier than you might want. That is why they read to you and pray a goodnight prayer with you, that you might have joy and strength in the morning and *freedom* to enjoy the coming day. Getting enough rest and, along with rest, clarity of mind are good things in this world. They increase your options and freedom to do things.

This is why your parents preach the old-fashioned virtue of self-control to you. Seek self-mastery, seek self-control, lest you end up the slave of sin and vice and addiction.

Seek to maximize your options. Cherish your school years even more so that when you graduate, you will have the world at your feet. Cherish your health, so that you will have some freedom in this world and will not be weighed down by heavy and lethargic bodies that hinder you from launching into things. Cherish your innocence, your truthfulness, your purity, that you will have the option of presenting a good and strong self to your beloved someday. Wake up in the morning and spring out of bed, light on your feet, unencumbered by the addictions and vices and various forms of wastefulness that are contracting the liberty of so many of our young people. Do not trade life for beer, for pot, and for anything unworthy of your body, for your body is the very temple of God. Cherish Christ within you and seek to manifest him to the world.

Each of us, whether we are young or old, let us seek to defend and enlarge our freedom. Let us, for example, not rack up so much debt for it weighs us down and keeps us from being nimble on our feet. Let us have no truck with illegal practices in the market place, lest we do ourselves harm by threatening our own reputations and rendering ourselves cynical. And absolutely shun criminality, lest we really end up with a contraction of liberty, all the way to prison.

And we can do this thing, this blessed rebellion against sin, for Jesus did it ahead of us, thereby establishing the possibility of successful mutiny against sin. Pity the poor slave who escapes the slave master, but has no one to befriend him or to guide him. But such is not your lot. Rather, in Baptism you both rebelled and escaped from death and found your friend all at once. St. John Chrysostom expresses well the blessing of finding a friend, a Commander, who can lead us into freedom:

...there is a hard warfare at hand for us. And for this reason we need strong armor, and also a noble spirit, and one acquainted too with the ways of this warfare; and above all we need a commander. The Commander however is standing by, ever ready to help us, and abiding unconquerable, and has furnished us with strong arms likewise.(Homilies on *Romans*, on Romans 6)

And soon now we rise to our feet and walk toward our Commander as he comes to us in the Blessed Sacrament. He has been there. He has been where we are, tempted and tested and struggling with sin. He has known the allure of Satan's promises that he could have dominion over all the world and all the glory thereof, yet he did not fall for that trap, for that slavery. Through mighty labors and through the offering of his own precious body and blood, Jesus has won for us a way of escape from bondage to sin. And through this Blessed Sacrament, Jesus meets with us each one to tell us that he means that way of escape for us, for you and me and for as many in this world as are willing. That is, Christ desires freedom for us and promises us that he will be with us as we search and reach toward that freedom and make it our own, through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.