

Freedom of Confession

July 5, 2020

Romans 7:15-25a

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed, signaling the separation of the Thirteen English Colonies from England out of a desire to form their own country, our country. They broke off from England in pursuit of the “inalienable” rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In other words, they broke off from England that they, and we by extension, might have freedom from a government that, while it ruled us, it did not represent us, and that taxed us without said representation. Since then, we have celebrated, guarded, fought for, some even dying for, this freedom. Our freedom, our ability to believe what we believe, to speak and have our voices heard, to vote for our elected officials, to simply be who we want to be, is something that we as United States citizens cherish above all else. In fact, in the first episode of HBO’s *The Newsroom*, a panel of three people are asked by a young college student “What makes America so great?” The second person on the panel says, “Freedom and freedom.” So much so do we believe in our freedom that our country is even nicknamed “The Land of the Free.” However, this raises an interesting question: Are we really free?

As citizens of the United States, we have freedom, like many other nations on the planet. These freedoms are secured for us in our Constitution. However, I ask this question not in the sense of “Are we really free as Americans?” I ask this question rather in the sense of “Are we really free as Christians?” This is an interesting question, because we just got done with the Easter season, whereby we celebrate Christ’s sacrifice on behalf of all humanity in all times and places to free us from our sinfulness and the consequences of said sinfulness. There’s not a Christian out there that would deny that, through Christ, we are forgiven of our sins. In other words, we are free from having to fear that we haven’t done enough to atone for our sins. As Children of God, as believers that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, we are free to confess our faith and shout “Alleluia” from the rooftops for our having been freed from Death. However, as Children of God, as Christians; as “heirs to the kingdom,” a “royal priesthood,” a “chosen people;” we are not “free,” at least according to Paul.

In today’s reading, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans argues that we are not free. He argues that, though Christ has saved us from Death, we are still “slaves to Sin.” However, this phrase “slaves to Sin,” there is a distinct clarification that needs to be made. Often, when we think of “sin,” we think of “sin” with a lower-case “s,” not an uppercase “S.” “Sin” with a lowercase “s” is defined as those actions which are counterproductive to the reconciliation of Heaven and Earth, those words, thoughts, and deeds which pull us further away from being in a perfect relationship with the Triune God. However, the sin that Paul speaks of here has an uppercase “S,” indicating that he is not speaking about the sinful actions we take. Rather, Paul is speaking about Sin as an entity, a “puppet master” of sorts that compels us to “be sinful,” to do “sin.” He says as much in his letter.

Throughout this section of his letter, Paul speaks about doing what he doesn’t want to do rather than what he *does* want to do, about doing what is wrong when he knows what is right. He describes it as a war going on in his very soul where “good” and “evil” are currently at war with one another. This is an experience that is so well-known among humans that is tantamount

to being part of the very definition of what it means to be human. We know that words and actions hurt, but yet, that doesn't stop us from hurting other people. Sometimes those rude comments we hear ourselves saying in our minds, they slip out. They find a physical voice, unable for us to take them back. Often children's and youth pastors will use the image of toothpaste as a demonstration, saying that once it's out of the tube, it cannot go back in, and so too is this true of the words from our mouths. Those actions we are tempted to take but know are wrong, sometimes we are overcome with emotion and hastiness that we see ourselves putting the candy bar in our purse, throwing the punch, whatever it might be, but we feel like we're along for the ride, like something else is controlling us, compelling us to do these things. This however is not to say that we are "weak" or to place some other demeaning term on us as humans.

As Christians, we know what the Law requires of us. We are to love our God before and above all else, and we are to love our neighbors without exception. We are to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We know the Law, and we hopefully do our best to exemplify that Law in everything we do, say, and think. However, even amidst all these efforts, we still find ourselves thinking, doing, and saying things we know we shouldn't think, do, or say. As it turns out, our best is not enough to free us from Sin, mainly because Sin is inhuman. It is not within the capabilities of a human to defeat all the evil in his or her heart. It is not within the capabilities of all humans to defeat all evil everywhere and in every time. As humans, we are unable to fight this war properly because we are imprisoned, caught in the middle of the war. Facing that kind of truth, this passage begins to sound hopeless, as if there is no purpose to even trying to do what is right. However, that is not the case. Paul here is actually arguing that there is a purpose to our trying to do what is right and that there is a way to break free.

How do we break free, then? The answer: confession. "Confession" by definition is being forthright and completely honest about something. Just as much as a person can confess their sins, they can confess their faith, their love, their alliance to a sports team, etc. We find our freedom in confession. When we confess our sins, we confess our knowing that we have done something wrong, both the known and the unknown, and that, though we are perfectly made in God's image, we are by no means perfect. In confessing our sins, we acknowledge that we cannot win this fight on our own and that, though we might seek to be independent, we have been, are, and always will be dependent upon God's gracious gifts of love, mercy, guidance, and forgiveness. In confessing our faith, we make a declarative statement that, while there is both the Law of Sin and the Law of God at war within our hearts, we have picked a side. We have chosen the Law of God to be the rules and commandments by which we wish to live our lives. We choose to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God over disregarding God and the needs of others for our own self-gratification. In confession, we find true freedom. In confession, we find a freedom that has been celebrated, cherished, guarded, fought for, and died for far longer than our "sweet land of liberty" has been around. So, I ask you all: how will you best exercise your freedom of confession?