

Freedom

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on July 4, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Romans 7:15-25a, John 8:31-38.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

1. One of my fondest memories is of a Fourth of July celebration my family experienced about 10 years ago at Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia. All five of us went up to see the Phillies play. I don't remember who they played or whether they won or lost. I do remember the fireworks display after the game. We were allowed to go out onto the playing field where we sat on the grass. Music blared. One of my favorites. John Philips Sousa, *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Then the fireworks began. We all "oo"ed and "ah"ed. Babies cried. The evening came to a climax with a seemingly endless shower of aerial bursts. And then, when the noise subsided, the most glorious sight of all: the fiery representation of the American flag. We all came to our feet and joined a band in a heartfelt rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner"? I looked around. Red and Yellow, Black and White. Italians from South Philadelphia. African Americans from North Broad Street. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, atheists and agnostics. Suburban and city and inner city people. Young and old. Rich and poor. I felt pride and humility. We were celebrating our freedom, our national freedom. We were celebrating the fact that we were a community. By being there together we were reaffirming that, as different as we were from one another, we belonged. And we gather this morning, and every Sunday morning, as a church because we belong. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, "I belong - body and soul, in life and in death- not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil."

2. The only problem is, I don't always feel free from the dominion of the devil. Apparently, the Apostle Paul didn't always feel free from the dominion of the devil either. In the seventh chapter of Romans he says, "I see in my (bodily) members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my (bodily) members."

3. I love this portion of Scripture. St. Paul makes himself so vulnerable. So human. This hero of the Christian faith. The greatest missionary in the history of the church. The greatest

Christian theologian. A man of deep spiritual experience. Caught up into heaven at one time. Saw things he was unable to describe. The depth of his faith. A man who repeatedly risked his life so that others might know the grace of God. "For to me to live is Christ to die is gain." A man of great courage who endured shipwreck and prison and beatings and mocking for his faith in Christ. This great Christian exposes his heart in Romans chapter 7. He makes himself vulnerable. He tells us about his spiritual struggles and failures. "I don't do what I want to do. I do the very thing I hate. I am not free. I am captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." Then he cries out in spiritual despair. "I am a wretched man. Who will rescue me? Who will free me?" And yet he ends this section, not in despair, but in gratitude. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

4 I am very much aware of the history of interpretation of this passage. Some say Paul was describing his life before his conversion. A Christian would never say, "I am captive to the law of sin." But the majority opinion throughout the history of the church is that Paul is describing his life after conversion. We are hearing the voice of a Christian when he says, "I want to do what is good. I delight in the law of God." Paul is describing, not only his own experience, but the experience of every Christian, including the most faithful and devout.

5 Most of us can identify with Paul. Time after time people tell me, devout Christians tell me, "I do not do what I want." I decide to trust my loved one to God's care and not be anxious about the future. But I worry. I do not do what I want. I decide to be more understanding and patient with my teenage sons but I become impatient. I do not do what I want. I decide to be more communicative with my wife, but I fall into my old habits. I do not do what I want. Have you ever walked through a mall and come home with a purchase and you say to yourself, "Why did I buy that? That's not really what I want."

6. If you've suffered through terrible depression, you could tell us about bondage. If you suffer with alcoholism, you could tell us about bondage. If you're addicted to smoking, you could tell us about bondage. It's like something has you, something you can't shake, some dark,

uncontrollable force which you're powerless to hold back. And yet, God promises us victory. We can be grateful. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

7. I don't know if Angel Davidson is a Christian. She very well could be. She's a 23-year old heroin addict sitting in Lancaster County Prison. She wrote a letter to the *Solanco Sun Ledger*. "Teens do not realize that heroin is so addicting that you lose everything - your self-respect, any trust you had from other people, morals - *and your freedom goes right out the door. I am not talking about being in jail. You become a prisoner to the drug.* You can not go anywhere or do anything without buying heroin first. You wake up in the morning, feel like dying, wonder where you're going to get your first bag. It's the last thing you want before you go to bed. You will beg, borrow, steal and lie to get it. You will do things you never imagined doing." I hear the voice of Paul saying, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

8. There was a lot of debate last week in the House of Representatives about the Law of God, the Ten Commandments. The House voted on displaying the *Ten Commandments* on the walls of every public school. The Senate will take up the debate next week. A reporter asked one Congressman, "Are you in favor of posting the *Ten Commandments*." The Congressman responded, ^{sounded sincerely} "I'm in favor of obeying them." He knew, with the apostle Paul, that it's one thing to ^{post} know the *Ten Commandments* and it's another thing to obey them. With Paul he could say, "I delight in the law of God, but I see another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin."

9. We can see a parallel in our national life. ^{We are free but we believe - freedom but for many people it's still not a reality} We sing, "My country tis of thee, sweet land of liberty." But yesterday we heard of the murders in Chicago, hate crimes, several Jews and African Americans were murder in drive by shootings. Hate crime is on the increase in America. We have not yet completely lived up to our calling. Too many Americans do not enjoy the freedom to which we have been called as a nation.

10. Pat Mora is a Southwestern poet from El Paso, Texas, of Mexican-American parents. She writes in a poem printed in last weeks *Oxford Tribune* -

Immigrants wrap their babies in the American flag,
feed them mashed hot dogs and apple pie,
name them Bill and Daisy,
buy them blonde dolls that blink blue
eyes or a football and tiny cleats
before the baby can even walk,
speak to them in thick English,
hallo, babee, hallo,
whisper in Spanish or Polish
when the babies sleep, whisper
in a dark parent bed, that dark
parent fear, "Will they like
our boy, our girl, our fine American
boy, our fine American girl?"

it's a wonderful feeling to know that you belong. One way to celebrate 4th is to let these immigrants know they are welcome, you belong - Tuesday of
I'll be filled with pride again tonight when the fireworks go off. We have our American *welcomes*

flag waving. But we are not all that we have been called to be as a nation. We haven't yet

reached the promised land. We have a ways to go, both as a nation and as Christians. *And I'll be*

grateful as a Christian, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" Thanks for
And if I might paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We may not make it to the

promised land in this life. But we've been to the mountain top. We have been to Mt. Calvary. *selective forgiveness*

We have surveyed the wondrous cross. We've seen the promised land in the resurrection of *grace*

Jesus. And we look to the day when all God's children around the world will sing, in the words *acceptance*

of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God, almighty. We are free at last." *belonging*

hope

freedom in Christ

The promise of freedom