

Free at Last...

It is a coincidence, or as I like to say a "God-incidence" that today, on this Sunday before we celebrate the 4th of July, Independence Day, we hear a reading from St. Paul writing to the Romans about "freedom." In fact, all through the summer, for the next 10 weeks, we'll be having a reading on Sundays from the letter to the Romans.

Romans is the first letter listed in the New Testament after the Four Gospels and The Book of Acts. It was not the first letter Paul wrote. It is considered his most important. He wrote it near the end of his missionary travels in expectation that he would visit Rome on his way to Spain (It's another God-incidence today as we think about Paul writing to the Romans that our J2A pilgrims have gone to Rome and return home from Italy tomorrow night).

The letter to the Romans expands on Paul's two great teachings: Grace and the Church as The Body of Christ. Grace is God's free gift of love, forgiveness and mercy. Grace brings us freedom. We all respond this grace by sharing our responses as Christ's body – The Church. As Mother Teresa liked to say, "Jesus has no hands but our hands; no feet, but our feet..." Grace frees us to do Christ's work in the world.

Karl Barth, my favorite theologian, in his commentary on Romans writes that we are "under Grace." He calls the 6th chapter of Romans, "Grace." The verses for today's reading Barth labels "the power of obedience." For Barth the good news of God in Christ is a "shattering disturbance, an assault which brings everything into question..."¹ Grace is "the meaning of our existence."² We are blessed to have this parish, our Church home, named Grace. Grace calls everything into question. Grace is the meaning of our existence.

For Paul life gives us a choice: choose Grace, God's love or choose sin, our own self-interest. Paul discovered Grace through his own conversion. After being a zealot Jewish persecutor of the Church, hunting down and executing Christians, Paul was transformed when he discovered Jesus, accepted Grace, and became free to share the "good news" of God in Christ. Paul shared this freedom, this liberation, on his travels, ending up in Rome.

Paul asks us "who do we serve?" How do we understand grace, our freedom through faith? Good questions for the 4th of July, as we celebrate our freedom, our independence from Great Britain 241 years ago; and our freedom from anything, anyone that might oppress us, enslave us.

Jesus said that the truth would make us free (John 8:32). These words are written in Greek in the big rose window in the Narthex; you see them today and at other times, as a symbol on our bulletins. Jesus proclaims, "I am the way, the truth, the life..." (John 14:6) Jesus brings us God's grace, God's freedom.

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edition, Oxford Press, London, 1980, p. 225.

² *Ibid.*, p. 226

Our July 4th celebrations as Christians are more than just a celebration of our national history. We know the truth in the grace and love of Christ. This transcends the democratic system, national politics, and our past and present history. When I first read today's reading from Romans I immediately thought of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his amazing speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963 when he ended with the words of an old African-American spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last..."

King knew St. Paul's letter to the Romans. King knew Jesus' teaching and promise, the truth will make you free. King knew Jesus to be the way, the truth and the life. This is the freedom we celebrate every 4th of July. This is the freedom we celebrate every day of our lives.

Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42