

In-Dependent

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Romans 6:12–23

One of my favorite movies is *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. My children just love it when I quote that classic or imitate its characters or sing its songs or allude to its plot.

(Actually, they don't. Oh, well.)

I am especially fond of Hermie. Do you remember Hermie? He's the elf who wants to be a dentist.

Poor Hermie. Nobody understands him, because everybody knows that elves make toys and none of them ever is a dentist. So, mocked and misunderstood, Hermie decides to leave home. He meets up with Rudolph, the young reindeer with the embarrassingly and blindingly bright red nose. Rudolph likewise feels mocked and misunderstood.

Hermie says to Rudolph, "I want to be independent." Actually, he says it this way: "In-dee-PEN-dent." (I love that.) And he has the great idea of hitting the road with Rudolph. "Hey, let's go be in-dee-pen-dent together!"

Which I think is really funny. And oh so familiar.

Because we know people like that: those who say they want independence, who seek independence, but who are so dependent on their group of independence-seekers, never realizing their mutual dependency, their sameness. They don't notice their *in*-dependence, that they are *in* a state of being *dependent* upon others: for identity, for purpose, for meaning, for expression.

"Let's go be independent together!"

Just two days from now, we will be marking, with parades and barbecues and (perhaps) time off from work, this country's independence. By happy convention we set aside the Fourth of July, and the weekend closest to it, for celebrating the freedoms that all in this country have, citizens and non-citizens alike. It started on Friday evening. I know this. Our *dog* knows this. Poor Ziva. Ziva doesn't like fireworks. No, she does not.

For the Christian, Independence Day is rightly a day of celebration. We don't have to be mute or stoic on that day. With our neighbors we too can be thankful for the freedoms we have:

to assemble,
to worship,
to protest,
to agree and be agreeable,
to disagree and be disagreeable,
to speak,
to think,
to write and blog and tweet,
all as we please.

We can be thankful for the freedoms that are given distinctly to citizens of this great land: to vote and thus to effect change in politics and policies, to participate in self-rule rather than rule by monarchs or tyrants — a participation, by the way, that benefits not only those who exercise the right to vote, but also those who do not, or cannot:

the young,
the ill,
the alien (whether legal or illegal),
the imprisoned,
the confused,
the distracted,
the cynical.

All these, and more, benefit from the freedom we celebrate. And so, we are thankful.

But *how* we are thankful, and *why* we are thankful should be different for the Christian. It really should. Because the Christian must understand all these freedoms not as ultimate but as relative, not as *the* blessing of life but rather as one among many blessings given to us by God. For the Christian, something else, or rather, *someone* else, is to be acknowledged as both the pinnacle and the source of all blessings.

You see, it really comes down to a shocking claim that Christians make, at least those Christians who are truly attentive to and formed by scripture. And the claim is this: *freedom is not the most important thing.*

That's right. Freedom, for the Christian, is not nor cannot be the most important thing. Some may not like that. Some may find it subversive, or non-patriotic.

But it is true.

And it goes beyond that. The reality that those blessed by God will truly, if reluctantly, confess is this: there can be *no such thing* as absolute freedom — not for us, not for any creature in this big wide world. We are not nor can ever be fully independent. We are always in some relationship of dependence on something or someone.

The only question is whether that dependent relationship will be healthy and holy.



That's a big thing with Paul, the apostle, who wrote to Christians in that big patriotic city of Rome. A few minutes ago, I read some of what he wrote to them. As Paul sees it, every person is some one's or some thing's possession. Every person is a slave to another, bound to honor another or at least operate within boundaries set by another.

And this is not just an observation about economics or families or politics. It's a spiritual insight.

Paul tells his friends that they have “been set free from sin, [and they] have become slaves of righteousness.” He tells them, he tells us, “that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God.”

So it is that for Paul there are only two choices: either you're a slave to sin, or you're a slave to God. For Paul, the only freedom there can be is a freedom that sets you free from bondage to sin so that you can then be obedient and bound to God. For Paul, to be free is to be released

by Christ from the abusive slavery of sin and placed under the tender rule and loving authority of God.

Perhaps all that disturbs you, all that talk about slavery and being enslaved. Perhaps that needles your high regard for freedom and liberty. Maybe it bothers you that Paul would put things in such a stark “either/or” kind of way.

We make so much of freedom and independence in our culture. In many ways, it is good that we do so. For in life and society, the denial of individual freedoms to a few sooner or later harms the many. It’s like what that German pastor Martin Niemöller famously said about his and his friends’ silence during the horrors in Germany leading up to World War II:

First they came for the communists,
and I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a Jew.

Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Of course, those who are most ready to downplay the importance of rights and the freedoms that flow from them are those with plenty of power: power to create their own opportunities not available to those with no such power. As a Christian, I have little patience for those who, in their comfort and power, think that civil rights and basic human freedoms and self-determination are no big deal. These *are* a big deal.

But even so, we sometimes make so much of freedom and liberty, but we do so in shallow, even unrealistic, ways.

Is it really freedom to suffer from addictions: to alcohol, to drugs, to work, to sex? Is it really freedom to be able to engage in compulsive, personally destructive behavior? Is that really freedom?

Is it really freedom to be emotionally unable or unwilling to commit in love to another person? Is it really freedom to treat physical intimacy as something like an all-you-can-eat buffet? Is it really freedom to be able to walk away from your commitments? Is that really freedom?

Is it really freedom

to demean others,
to speak with shocking disrespect toward others,
to harbor and even express racist or sexist attitudes about others,
to mock others because of
their ethnicity
or their physical appearance
or their handicaps
or their political views
or their level of education
or their sexual orientation?

Is that really freedom?

Are these really the signs of a “free spirit”? The markers of independence? Or instead the evidence of a deeper and more insidious form of captivity? Aren’t they really just other forms of bondage, dressed up in the costumes of independence? We might *call* them “freedom” or “independence”, but are they really?

“Let’s go be in-dependent together!”



Now, you might object to this. You might think you’re not so bad. Because you’re not trapped in the various forms of bondage I’ve named, you might happily say, “Hey, I’m good,” and decide that Paul’s stark picture of reality doesn’t apply to you.

We shouldn’t let ourselves off so easy. We shouldn’t become blind to the reality of life apart from God.

It’s easy to deny, or forget, just how trapped we are:

in our compulsions,
in our fears,
in our appetites,
in our lusts,
in our seething disappointment in others,
and, really, in ourselves.

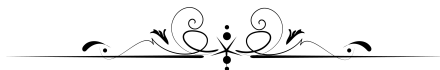
We deny, or forget, that freedom, real freedom, is an illusion, at times perhaps a useful illusion, but an illusion all the same, one that obscures our tendency willingly to give ourselves over as slaves to forces that would do us harm.

We deny it, or we forget it, except at those times when the brokenness of our being is exposed in the light of something greater or truer, when our ugliness of heart is shown for what it really is by a soul more beautiful or a scene more lovely or a statement more truthful —

the coo of a baby,
the scent of lilacs in spring,
the glimpse of scattered sunbeams over a mountain vista,
a word of forgiveness or encouragement

— each of these unexpectedly becoming the work of God through creaturely means, and we are shamed out of our denial, and realize that we’ve been striving for an independence that does not exist, that we’ve been living a false independence.

“Let’s go be in-dependent together.”



Paul has this strange thing to say to us: *either* you’re a slave to sin, *or* you’re a slave to God through the work of Christ.

Either you belong to that life-denying force

of broken promises
and empty hope
and shattered dreams,

or you belong to Jesus, who affirmed life

by conquering death,
by keeping promises,
by giving to his own a sure hope healed and fulfilled and beyond all dream-
ing.

To what, or to whom, do *you* belong?

We value independence. Sometimes we may even think that the highest form of human existence is to submit to no one. So this may be strange news to us. Yet this strange news is good news, the good news of Jesus Christ, *in* whom and *from* whom we learn that when we submit to him, we are lifted up; when we belong to him, then we can finally be who we are meant to be.

As Richard John Neuhaus said, “In the Christian tradition, being true to yourself means being true to the self that you are called to be.”

It is good news, because we have sought the mirage of absolute independence, we have sought it and have instead found brokenness and heartache. And now, we hear (perhaps again) the gracious invitation by Christ to submit to God, to belong to Christ, to lose ourselves and find ourselves in dependence on the Lord Jesus.

So it is that I ask all of you, I urge all of you (as I urge also myself) to seek obedience to God. I urge you to submit yourselves to the will of God as made known in Jesus. I urge you to take both seriously and joyfully your discipleship.

Friends, it's time to stop.

It's time to stop ignoring our dependence on the Lord Jesus.

It's time to stop pretending at being Christians, and pretending at being a church.

It's time to stop offering half-hearted participation in pious symbolism of forgotten meaning.

It's time to stop thinking that we can be Christian without obeying,
forgiven without changing,
justified with no evidence of being sanctified.

No, it's time for us to be truly Christ's own possession, to be more and more like him who set us free from sin so we can belong to God.

It's time for us to commit (either for the first time or again).

Commit to him who sets the captive free,
who forgives the sinner,
who heals the sick.

Commit to following his example,
to loving his name,
to learning the sound of his voice.

Commit to seeking deeper understanding of his ways:
forgiving the betrayer,
welcoming the stranger,
loving the unlovable,
enduring pain for others.

My friends, let us commit to Jesus, who gives life and shape both to our dependence and our (limited but real) independence. For on him, and in him, we can truly depend.