



“YESTERDAY’S FREEDOM”
SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 6: 12-23
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Romans 6:12-23

6:12 Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.

6:13 No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.

6:14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

6:15 What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

6:16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone 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?

6:17 But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted,

6:18 and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

6:19 I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

6:20 When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

6:21 So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death.

6:22 But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.

6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

How we understand freedom is a direct corollary to how we understand power.

And Paul seems to assume that human beings can best understand power as domination or the capacity to constrain or to induce submission.

Paul admits that he's using human terms to describe God's grace because the human mind has limits—we can get stuck in one way of thinking—so he's trying to speak our language by using the language of enslavement.

I'll admit, as a feminist, I've never been a big fan of Paul. His words, cast in human terms as they are, have easily translated into license to loath the human body, which has easily translated into scriptural warrant for hating the female body and for creating shame around sexuality.

So Paul's language about enslavement to God and righteousness, spoke into my feminist sensitivities, into my healing journey as a survivor of the violence of patriarchy with a twisted kind of logic that I rejected. And when reading from that lens, I still think Paul's assumptions about power here are dangerous and easily an instrument of harm.

Freedom in my feminist understanding is freedom from domination.

But maybe that's yesterday's freedom—at least for me.

Today I am invited to read Paul a different way—from the perspective of whiteness, from the perspective of the sin of whiteness.

Now before you take that last sentence and run with it—I know all the tricks whiteness likes to play. Whiteness likes to assume the role of victim as quickly as it can—that helps whiteness avoid the withering critique that it is due. Whiteness knows that if it can take on the role of victim early and often, it doesn't have to relinquish its role as the oppressor.

It's a game of smoke and mirrors really.

And feminism can get swept up in that manipulative game—and white women like me who are survivors of sexual violence, have been conspirators with whiteness. We have protected it with our focus on patriarchy at the expense of truly attending to the sin of whiteness.

So today I read Paul as a white person—as someone who stands before you today and wants to be healed of the ways whiteness has weaponized my mind, my body, even my faith. I am here today with a deep desire to repent, to turn around, to lay down the dominion that whiteness has over me.

Reading Paul as a white person means I must repent of the way my mind, my ways of thinking, my ways of seeing the world have been instruments of wickedness.

That wickedness is connected to the lie that power is domination. But if I left it at that I could think I was cured of whiteness. There is more to this story—and it's about yesterday's freedom.

The drive was thirteen hours. I would try to sleep most of it, waking up when I would feel the car slow down to get off at an exit. My sleep made waking up in a new state a strange adjustment—reading the terrain to figure out how far we'd come. I knew when we were near my grandmother's house because of all the Spanish moss in the live oak trees.

The first thing we always did was sit down in the front room of my grandmother's house and she would tell us the stories of the day. What was going on with who in Fayette. Year after year those stories seeped into me—helping to define me and how I understood where and what I came from.

I have some pictures here with me today—pictures of some of my ancestors—I asked them to be here today because I know my healing is about their healing, too. (show pictures of Judge Truly, Mattie Whitney Truly, Thelma and Marjorie, and the Truly House)

Our people were leaders, churchgoers, well respected—founders of that town. The name “Truly” was the cornerstone of the church, the bank, the courthouse. My grandmother (she's one of the little girls in the picture) told stories to position my great grandfather as a good man—Judge Truly. He stood up to racist cousins. He was on the Board of Trustees at Alcorn State, the oldest public historically black land-grant institution in the United States founded in 1871 to educate the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans. The Truly house was a focal point of that community while my Great Grandfather was alive—he was a lawyer, the founder of the bank, an Elder in the church, a Mississippi Supreme Court justice, a state legislator, and a candidate for governor.

(come back to MMS)

Those stories not only helped define me, they gave me a sense of responsibility. They also told me I could stand outside the accusation of racism and know that my

family was full of good white people—the ones who didn't say and do horrible things to keep slavery and racial terror in place.

Somewhere inside me I hoped those stories my grandmother told me gave me freedom from culpability for racism. Those stories gave me the freedom that came with being a “good white person.” But that is yesterday's freedom—a false freedom.

Because whiteness cannot be about goodness, even though there are white-identified people who have done good things. Whiteness is not about my skin color or melanin content, whiteness is about lies that created a world in which my family made a name for itself building a reputation for being upstanding and faithful and respected.

In that narrative was bondage masquerading as freedom—bondage to white mentalities of superiority, white mentalities of perfection, white mentalities of paternalism, white mentalities of white ways are the right ways.

That's yesterday's freedom—the false freedom that taught me my family, my culture wasn't the problem.

“Present your members to God as instruments of righteousness,” Paul says. But when a person's brain is occupied by whiteness one can mistaken righteousness for the moral high ground whiteness tells whiteness that it gets to claim.

Whiteness makes the human brain its instrument of wickedness. And the body follows suit. Whiteness creates a whole universe of meaning around fear and exceptionalism, aspirations and success, beauty and power. Whiteness spins out a whole universe in which the terror that whiteness has at its disposal is masked as law and order, decency and respectability, polite society and the finer things.

Whiteness tells whiteness that wealth will make you free, prestige will make you free, respectability will make you free, hard work will make you free, being in control will make you free.

It can be hard to see the wickedness of whiteness, when whiteness tells whiteness that it's doing a great job at being good.

Whiteness can adapt to the circumstances, but it never changes. Because it was created to assure its ability to always win. Whiteness created the whole idea of winning—and made sure the rules were always in its favor.

That's yesterday's freedom.

All these years of doing anti-racism work—decades of that work, and I was still operating with the delusion that my understanding how race had functioned in my life was me being able to tell the story of my relationships with Black people.

But the story of how race has functioned in my life is really the story of how being white has functioned in my life. And that is a story I still struggle to tell. Because it is painful and it is concealed in layers and layers of integrity constructed and confirmed by whiteness itself.

The tangled up story of whiteness perpetuates itself—whiteness took virtue and fashioned it for its own purposes.

Reading Paul as a white person, I am beginning to understand how far I am from the freedom that Christ wants me to have.

There are a lot of false freedoms trying to pass themselves off as real freedom in America today--like the idea that freedom is not having to be responsible for your impact on other people, on other living things. That leads to the idea that freedom means you get to write your own history, that freedom is the freedom to do as you please, that freedom is the freedom to refuse to learn, to refuse to change.

But that's yesterday's freedom.

That's the freedom that white people have tried to cling to with statues of confederate soldiers and slave traders and genocidal leaders. And those statues are being toppled not by the laws of the land—that's one of the tools whiteness has used to keep them in place.

Those statues are being toppled by the boldness to believe that our shared story is actually about freedom—the freedom to tell the truth of the violence that has tried for hundreds of years to define us as a nation.

Today's freedom is Christ's freedom—it's about true freedom. The freedom to give your whole self to God and trust that you will be healed. We don't have to feign goodness to the source of all goodness. God loves a broken and contrite heart—a heart broken open by the bondage that held it captive for too long.

Repenting of my whiteness begins with me letting myself see the truth about what I've been captive to—and I believe it begins with harshness, cruelty, and hostility.

My family may have been well-respected leaders and law-abiding citizens, but we have not excelled at dealing with emotional pain. And that wound of whiteness makes it hard not to feel shame around difficult emotions.

My family is supposed to be better than that. We help other people with their difficult emotions, but we should keep ours to ourselves. There is a cruelty in that response to emotional pain.

And that means preaching a sermon like this is a risk for me—I assume I will get shamed and blamed by other white people for this sermon. That's a part of what being white has been about for me—shame and blame around difficult emotions, around difficult truths.

And I've allowed myself to stay captive to that wickedness, to that wariness about being honest about the ways whiteness has led to me to do harm in the world.

And that wariness has diminished my life and my capacity to be fully alive, to be truly free. Laying down whiteness means laying down that need to be good, and opening myself up to the promise of what it means to truly be loved.

Freedom in Christ is really about being able to trust the world around you has love to offer—to trust that you can be yourself and that others can be themselves.

That's today's freedom—and it correlates with God's power, not domination. God's power is healing power, God's power is transforming power, God's power is the power of truth. God's power is the power of love.

I repent of my whiteness. I repent of the way I thought I needed to be good to be loved. I repent of my lack of trust in God's capacity to heal whiteness. What else would have kept me holding on to whiteness for so long?

I am ready for today's freedom. I am ready to trust that God will provide me with all the love that I need to heal.

Thanks be to God.