

"What It Means To Be Saved"
Studies in Romans
Lesson One: "Salvation and Slavery"
Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
June 26, 2011
Text: Romans 6:12-23
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I recall an episode of the original television series of *Star Trek* entitled "The Omega Glory," first broadcast in 1968. In the story the Enterprise is dispatched to the planet Omega IV to investigate the disappearance of another starship, the U.S.S. Exeter. Upon reaching the planet, the trinity of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy discover that Omega IV is inhabited by two rather primitive warring ethnic groups, the Yangs and the Kohms, and that the captain of the Exeter has, in fact, supplied phasers to the Kohms, which is, of course, a violation of the prime directive against overly interfering in a planet's natural development. At one point in the drama, Captain Kirk winds up in jail with the leader of the Yangs, Cloud William.

Kirk can't seem to get any conversation going with his cellmate until, inadvertently, Kirk uses the word "freedom," as in "I'll be glad when we can break out of here and get to freedom." In amazement, the Yang leader says, "Freedom. That is a Yang worship word. How do you know about freedom?" It turns out that Omega IV is a parallel

world to Earth, where the Yangs' primary symbol for worship is the American flag, and their creed is the Preamble to the Constitution. This scene always has stuck with me, probably because of this idea of freedom as a worship word.

It is, isn't it? Freedom is a worship word in our culture, as much now as in any time in our nation's history. We're like the Yangs in that respect. We value freedom, as well we should. But do we value it so much that at least to a certain extent, we worship it? One New Testament scholar has written that "the great idol of the modern age is personal independence" [Monroe, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 182]. And what do we do with idols? We worship them.

We also cherish and honor the so-called unalienable rights we have as free people. As a nation, there are few things that matter to us as much as our freedom and our rights as individuals and as special interest groups. Just try to limit our freedom or infringe upon our rights and you will have a fight on your hands. Freedom is indeed a worship word for us in our society today.

So needless to say, we embrace readily and enthusiastically the idea of salvation as freedom from sin. And it is, most assuredly. Paul refers to us in this passage as being slaves of sin, and that we are. We understand fully that faith in Christ frees us from our bondage to sin and death, so as we sing in one of our familiar hymns, "He breaks the

power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free." Schubert Ogden, my favorite seminary professor at Perkins, refers to Christ as the Liberator. The shackles we find ourselves in with respect to sin are loosened so that we may escape, and such freedom is made possible by the redemptive work of Christ in his sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf.

But we not only are freed *from*, we are freed *for*. We are freed from sin and are no longer slaves to it, but that does not mean we are not to be slaves. Notice carefully what Paul says in verse 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." Sanctification is the process by which our salvation is completed, the work of the Holy Spirit in us to make us more like Christ, so that we may experience authentic (eternal) life. That cannot happen unless we surrender ourselves totally to God, that is, allow ourselves to be controlled by him, completely led and guided by him, and practically speaking, owned by him. We are to be his.

So, as one of my seminary professors at Southwestern, Earle Ellis, used to say: "When we accept Christ as our Savior and Lord, we don't *lose* a master; we *trade* masters." In order to come from under the slavery to sin, we become slaves of God in Christ instead. Our

freedom can come about only to the extent to which we are willing to serve Christ instead of whatever it is we have been serving instead.

The biblical idea of salvation being understood as trading one master for another goes all the way back to the Exodus. The Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt, forced to serve Pharaoh. God freed them and released them from being in bondage. But he liberated them in order for them to become his people instead of Pharaoh's. They were to see themselves as belonging to the God who had rescued them rather than as belonging to the Egyptian king who had enslaved them.

Paul understands that to be a slave is to surrender our lives to the control of another. When slavery is defined in this way, it turns out that *all of us are slaves to something*. Some of us may be slaves to fashion or to certain other cultural trends. Some of us have become enslaved to physical attractiveness. Some of us seem to be shackled to our i-phones or i-pads and all the apps they provide for us. Some of us are in bondage to our jobs or careers.

Some of us are serving the accumulation of material things. Some of us have pledged our allegiance to personal wealth and are guided by the whims of Wall Street. Some of us are held captive by a particular ideology or doctrine. Bondage comes in all shapes and sizes, and we often forget that we have become enslaved voluntarily. We are under no compulsion to be slaves. As the theologian Glenn Frey has sung with

the Eagles, "So often times it happens that we live our life in chains, and we never even know we have the key."

In most if not all cases, the masters of this world we choose to serve as slaves are rather harsh and cruel. They show little or no mercy. Their expectations are unrealistically high. They demand more of us than we possibly can give, and as it turns out, the return we receive from serving as the slaves of these masters is never meaningful or satisfying. But Glenn Frey is correct, we can spend most or all of our life in the chains of slavery to these masters without ever realizing we have the key to escape and find liberation.

When we decide to quit serving something other than God, when we decide to let go of trying to please some other master, when we decide to quit being the slaves of the idols of this world and instead surrender fully, completely, totally to the Lordship of Christ, we will be saved. *There is salvation in that slavery and no other.* Salvation comes only as a result of our voluntarily becoming slaves of God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

What does such voluntary slavery look like? Where can we find an example of someone who lives to serve another in this way? One of the many blessings of serving as the Pastor of Schreiber over the last five years is to have had the chance to witness daily what real servanthood looks like. I have seen it modeled here constantly and

consistently by one individual in particular. This man voluntarily has made himself a slave of this congregation. He works tirelessly in the service of this church. His commitment, his dedication, his loyalty, his allegiance to this place are total and thus overwhelmingly inspiring. He will do anything anyone asks him to do for the church. He simply doesn't know how to say no.

He has made untold and unknown personal sacrifices to serve the church to the extent he does. His sense of duty to our congregation knows no limits. He has given his life for this institution, and even now, toward the end of his life, he is ever diligent in his desire to do the best job he possibly can do, whatever the nature of the task may be. And no matter what is asked of him, no matter how he is feeling, no matter what may be going on in his personal life—he gives himself completely to the service of this church with a smile on his face, a gleam in his eye, and a song in his heart. He is a most joyful servant. He is, of course, Wilford Punch, as fine a man as I ever have known and as fine an example of what it means to be a servant as I ever have observed.

Mr. Punch's willingness to serve Schreiber as our custodian and groundskeeper and so much more is what our willingness to serve Christ should look like. But his service to our church also describes the reality of what it is like to be a slave of Christ as Paul insists we need

to be, and that reality is not always rosy. Has Mr. Punch's service here been easy? No. Has he been rewarded as he should have been? Hardly, not when you consider how much it would cost the church to replace him with the professional services it would require to handle both lawn and custodial care. Is he taken for granted? Yes, from time to time. Is he asked to do more than is appropriate? Often. Is he treated with the respect he deserves? By some, yes, but by others, no. Our serving God completely will not spare us from the challenges and frustrations and hardships of life. It's hard labor to be sure.

Those of you who know and admire Mr. Punch to the extent that I do will agree with me about the level and the quality of his service to Schreiber. It is genuinely humbling to witness it day in and day out. So think about this: What would happen if each of us chose to serve Jesus in the same way Mr. Punch serves this church—with his level of commitment, his single-minded devotion, his selfless sense of duty? I believe two things would happen. First, we could accomplish more for Christ through this community of faith than we ever could imagine. Second, we would go through each and every day with a smile on our faces, a gleam in our eyes, and a song in our hearts. That is what it means to be saved—to choose the right master and serve him with all of who we are. *Salvation is voluntary slavery to God.*