

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

28th June 2020 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

ROMANS 6:12-18

SLAVES OF GOD'S LOVE

‘Slavery’. As soon as I say that word I am sure you all have pictures, thoughts or feelings which come into your head. And I am equally sure that they would be negative ones. When we think of slavery, we would think of things like captivity, cruelty, one human being owning and having total control over another, people being seen and treated as less than human. In our country and at this time it is a term which offends us, and rightly so. Sadly, though, it is not all in the past as it still happens in the world today, even in our own country in some forms that we don't normally see or notice.

So when Paul, in this next instalment from his letter to the Romans which we have here today, talks about slavery, it is probably these kinds of negative thoughts and images which immediately come to our mind; chains, whips, compulsion, cruelty. And, if we think about being slaves to sin, like when he writes here warning us to not let any part of our body be a slave to evil, we get what he says, don't we? Sin: our selfish desires and wants, our negative thoughts and feelings, our rebellion against God, can and does enslave us, doesn't it? As Paul says in the reading for next week in Romans chapter 7: ‘¹⁸ I know that my selfish desires won't let me do anything that is good. Even when I want to do right, I cannot. ¹⁹ Instead of doing what I know is right, I do wrong.’ (*Romans 7:18-19 CEV*) That, in one way, sums up slavery; being compelled to do what we don't want to do. And, if we live under sin, that is where we find ourselves. And then of course the follow on to that is that we end up suffering all the negative consequences of our sin. We don't want to suffer them, but we keep on doing the things which make them happen.

We understand, then, comparing our ongoing sin with slavery; both are negative and they belong well together. If you like; slavery is itself a sin, and sin makes us slaves to itself. That connection makes sense. But what about then when our reading goes on to say; ‘Make every part of your body a slave that pleases God’(13b), and then further along; ‘ You can be slaves of sin and die, or you can be obedient slaves of God and be acceptable to him’ (16b)? How does that work?

We are here talking about slavery to God, so now it becomes positive. One way to get our heads around this is to look at the first part of the reading I just read here, where Paul writes, ‘Make every part of your body a slave that pleases God’(13b). This is not slavery which is about fear, or force, or compulsion. The definition of this slavery to God, is a loving and willing response to the love, grace and forgiveness God shows to us. We experience what God has to give to us, and we want to both stay with Him, and also to respond in a way that will now please Him.

The point made here very bluntly, is that we are either slaves to sin and we die, or we are slaves to God and we enjoy all that we know He has to offer to us. There is no middle ground.

Can we deny that, and find a third alternative? Well, that reminds me of a couple of responses to human slavery which always make me smile. The first is in John chapter 8, when Jesus is telling some Jewish people that if they know the truth of God’s love for them they will be set free. Their response: ‘We are Abraham’s children! We have never been anyone’s slaves. How can you say we will be set free?’ (*John 8:33 CEV*) Mmm, I always think, ‘you guys need to go back and read your Bible; lots of stories of the Israelites, Abraham’s children, being slaves there. The other example is the patriotic British song, *Rule Britannia*, which has the proud and rousing chorus, ‘Britains never, never ever will be slaves’. Really? Remember the Romans, the Saxons? If we deny

history, we are more likely to repeat it. In a similar way, the point in this reading is that if we deny our slavery to sin, we are more likely fall to it.

Our sin, our rebellion against God, our pleasing ourselves and overlooking the needs of others, does matter. If we think that it's all ok, that we can just keep on sinning without trying in any way to stop it because Jesus died for us and God will forgive us, then we'll find that sin will enslave us, it will take us away from God. It may stop us from wanting to go back to God. It may stop us from even thinking that we are able to go back to God. Not every Prodigal Son ends up sitting in the pig pen knowing they need to go back home and beg for forgiveness. Too often slavery to sin, and even the negative consequences it brings, becomes such a part of our lives that we lose all sight and memory of the God who loves us and who has done all He can to keep us with Him. God's forgiveness is always there for us, but if we become enslaved to sin we can forget that. We need to both remember and heed the warnings we have here, and ask God to help and lead us to always remain close to Him.

It is right that slavery is a negative term for us; we need to remember what has happened in the past, and is happening today, so we can always be working for the freedom and dignity of all people. But slavery to God, in God's love, as we have it laid out for us here, is such a wonderful thing for us, because it is talking about staying close to God, receiving His forgiveness, living in His love. We know that we will go between following sin and God, it's a part of our nature; that's not an excuse, but it's a reality we need to accept if we are to fight against it. But we know also that ultimately, because of all Jesus did for us on the cross, that freedom.

Prayer: Lord God, please always keep us close to you and your love. Keep us aware of our sin and our need for your forgiveness. Help us to always try to follow you and remain close to you. Amen.

FURTHER DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Slaves to Sin

A big focus of this reading is on our slavery to sin. We need to acknowledge that this is a part of our lives so that we can fight against it and choose instead to follow and obey God.

- How does 'slavery to sin' come out in your life? Are there any thoughts, feelings or actions which you know are wrong, but you continue to think/feel/do them because you either just accept them or find them hard to stop? (*this is another of those 'you don't have to answer out loud' ones*)
- What can you do to break this slavery to sin?
- How can God help you break free from this slavery to sin?

Slaves to God

'Now you are set free from sin and are slaves who please God.' *Romans 6:18 CEV*

- What does it mean to you to become a 'slave to God'? Is it a positive or a negative thing?
- What are some of the positive things we receive and experience when we remain close to God and always try to follow His way for us?
- How can God help us to always stay close to Him?

The New Life We Now Live

As the forgiven and loved people of God we now live a new life with Him. Paul makes it very plain in this reading that this life doesn't mean we now freely do whatever we want because we are forgiven anyway, but that it is a life lived in response to God's love which now seeks to please and serve Him in all we do.

Quietly reflect and pray on:

- Confess to God anything which stops you from freely and lovingly following Him. Ask for His forgiveness for these things and His help to overcome them.
- Ask for God's help to both now live as who He has made you to be, and to help others to know about Him and His love also.

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