

Pastor T.C. Arnold
7th Sunday after Trinity
Romans 6:19-23
July 18th, 2010

Just north of St. Louis, the town of Alton, IL was once at the center of a civil rights crossroads. In the 1800s it was an important town for abolitionists – those opposed to slavery. Illinois was a free state across from the slave state of Missouri. Escaped slaves would cross the Mississippi to seek shelter in Alton, and proceeded to safer places through the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War several homes in Alton were equipped with tunnels and hiding places to aid slaves escaping to the North. Alton was one of the sites for the historic Lincoln-Douglas debates which led up to the election of a seat in the United States Senate. Even though this was one of seven debates – this one in Alton was particularly important and well attended because of the issue of slavery. Abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy was murdered by a pro-slavery mob while he tried to protect his Alton-based press from being destroyed for the third time. Lovejoy was considered by many as the first martyr of the abolition movement.

Recently the owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers NBA basketball team, Dan Gilbert was fined by Commissioner David Stern \$100,000 for comments about LeBron James that were considered insensitive and uncalled for. Jesse Jackson, a well noted civil rights activist said that Gilbert's comments gave the impression that he "owned" LeBron and not the Cleveland Cavaliers. LeBron James, if you don't know, is a basketball superstar who left Cleveland for "greener pastures" in Miami.

Slavery, human ownership, civil rights, has been an issue in our country since our country began. Comments that seem to suggest the same about any other person are still extremely taboo (for good reason). But slavery – or civil rights – has not been an issue for the United States alone. In fact, it has been an issue in most every country of the world – through all the history of the world, including the times of the Bible.

However, even though we are all aware of slavery and have an understanding of what it is – slavery has been understood in different ways throughout history. For example, in the New Testament, the Greek word for slave has a much broader meaning than what might be familiar to many. In the Roman world, slaves could serve in a variety of positions. Roman slaves quite often held positions of power and responsibility. Slavery was not associated with the oppression of a particular race. Typical Roman slaves hoped for release at age 30, the usual age for discharge. While in service, slaves could earn wages, buy and sell property and enter into contracts – and even own slaves themselves. Frequently, Roman free persons sold themselves into slavery in order to pay debts, while non-roman persons sold themselves in order to eventually obtain Roman citizenship. The understanding of slavery throughout the ages is quite broad.

Paul gives us another idea of slavery in our text today. In the verses just before the text begins for the 7th Sunday after Trinity, Paul says that we were once slaves to sin which leads to death. Now, because of God's grace, we are slaves to righteousness. Such a socially taboo topic like slavery is emphasized here by Paul. How horrible our ideas of slavery are...owning people...civil rights infractions...the mistreating of people and treating people as property. However, Paul is very intentional about talking in terms of slavery.

And I want you to be intentional about being slaves as well. Your pastor's desire is that you be a slave – the way that Paul desires your slavery to be. Not as one owned by another person – but as one whose life is totally taken and given by righteousness that was purchased and won for you on the cross. Our lives are in servant-hood to God's righteousness. As believers we are slaves to what Christ has won for us. We are slaves. Christians long to be slaves.

But as Paul would point out – the problem with Christians is that we long to be slaves of the wrong things. In our Baptism we are set free from sin. We, rather, have a habit of returning to it and

also become slaves to it. When we fall into the trap of sin we are serving sin – and sin leads to death. We are to serve Christ but sin takes precedence. Sin is our master. When the Lord would have us to bless our neighbor who speaks against us, we would rather hold grudges and not speak to them at all or speak ill of them. With this we serve sin. When we conspire to get away with something – to cheat at work – to cheat at home – to deceive for personal gratification – our mind is set on serving sin which leads to death. And beloved in the Lord – it is dangerous to be a slave to sin. Sin will grip you and never let you go. Sin will dominate you and remain the most important thing unless combated with the Word of God. Sin seeks to do the opposite of what your Baptism has given you – service to righteousness. Sin seeks to hurt you and to hurt those around you. Flee from such slave-hood. Paul sets it clearly before us in the Epistle reading. He makes it plain through plain words. He says, *“I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.”*

Paul speaks in “human terms” to the Romans – a way they can understand. The people understood the nuances of slavery. He was speaking in terms they could understand. I like when people speak to me in human terms. I don’t understand “non-human” terms. Sometimes people talk in computer terms – gigabites, hard drives, functions and capacities, processing speeds – these are terms that are quite confusing – even for someone in my generation. I understand human terms and not computer terms or maybe even mathematical terms or biology terms. Others may understand, but not me – probably not most of us. We need to hear in human terms and we need to speak in human terms. You need to speak in human terms.

Can you talk to your neighbor or un-churched friend about the Lord in human terms? Do you know how? It’s quite easy. You have the power to bless your neighbor. You can pronounce the Lord’s blessing on them. You can say, “May the Lord bless you and keep you on your trip – or – through this day – or – with your family...” You have the right and that Christian Calling. You have the blessings from God to invite your friends and family to be with you here – to rejoice with them in what you enjoy about this place. You have the opportunity to speak in “human terms” because that is the way your Lord has spoken to you. He not only spoke to you in “human” terms – He has come to you in Human terms.

Jesus, the Savior, the Word made “Human” (in every way except without sin) would not let any confusion about what He was talking about stand. So, instead of just saying it, He did it. He did it by showing you what true servant-hood, true “Godly” slavery, really is. He, the one who knew no sin, became sin for us. He became the biggest slave to sin by taking your sin upon Himself. We get to see this. We get to see this in the flesh and blood of communion, God coming in common ordinary elements. That is “true” slavery to you. That is servant-hood to His precious children in order to save them – to save you. Our Lord speaks in human terms by giving you His word. Our Lord shows Himself in human terms because that is the way we can see Him and understand Him. That is why Paul talks to us in this way.

We have the opportunity to talk to our children in Pre-Kindergarten or our Martin Luther Academy or our Weekday School or Sunday school about Jesus in chapel or in the classroom. Beloved in the Lord – they get it. They understand Jesus and what His love is. They understand that Jesus loved them to death. That’s what they need. That’s what they get. That’s what we all need.

We are slaves to the Gospel in order to grow and share what we need and what the world needs. No longer are we slaves to sin – our Savior has taken care of that. Now go – serve righteousness for the sake of a dying world. Be a slave to God’s grace because Jesus was a slave first. Paul shares this because we know slavery – total submission. Our Savior was totally submitted to us. This is the Gospel gift of life we have today. Thanks be to God. Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.