

5th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
July 5, 2020

Text: Romans 7:15-25a

Theme: Our Own Action

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

I apologize but I cannot resist the temptation. A heaviness has hung over our nation over these last few months so please allow me to lighten the mood if but for a few brief minutes! And for the record this is a true story.

One of our Lutheran churches was in the middle of a call process for a new pastor. The Call Committee interviewed several candidates and narrowed down their search to two. After a second interview they released the one pastor and voted to call the other pastor. It was the responsibility of the church secretary to send out the letter of call and she sent it to the wrong candidate. When the pastor received the letter he just assumed the congregation changed their mind. He was more than happy to leave his current church so immediately he resigned and wrote to the new congregation to let them know he accepted the call. Only then did the church leaders realize the error.

What were they to do? Do they tell the pastor that he was not selected and as a result leave him without a call? Or do they take him anyway knowing that the congregation choose the other pastor? I am not sure how they came to a final decision but I know the church kept him as their new pastor (and then started a search for a new secretary).

I will wait a minute for you to stop laughing before I continue!

July 4th marks the midpoint of the year and it one of the few holidays that is reserved for Americans. It is the day we remember the signing of the *Declaration of Independence* – a document written to guarantee the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We know that this year our celebrations are different from the ones we enjoyed in the past. But we can still display the American flag outside our homes. We can still picnic with family and friends in open areas. We can still enjoy free concerts.

And in some of our communities there will be spectacular fireworks at the end of the day.

As our nation has started to lift some of the restrictions that have been put into place (just in time for our July 4th weekend) we have also been reminded that the coronavirus is still with us. Over these months limits have been placed on our personal freedoms. We have not been able to do whatever we want and whenever we want. Instead we have been asked to do our part for the sake of the health and well-being of everyone around us. For example even if we are not sick we are to social distance and wear our masks when in public. We are to limit the number of people we invite to gatherings held in enclosed areas. And for the rest of our lives we will be washing our hands as often as possible for as long as it takes us to say the Lord's Prayer.

For those of us who believe in God and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ this is not a hardship for us. Our top priorities have always been to love God and to love our neighbor. We do the things we have been asked to do by health and government officials to keep ourselves and others safe. It is just one way we express our love for God.

Lately we have been searching Scripture to help us address the other issue we are facing as a nation. We are not only afflicted by the virus but we are suffering from deep wounds that have never healed. It will take a strong commitment from everyone to enact the kind of changes that are needed.

I once more believe that our love of God and neighbor will be our best guide forward. In my sermon last week I suggested that we need to tend first to our own hearts so that we can better tend to what ails our country. I can only speak for myself but I know I need to do better when it comes to the words I choose to speak and the actions I choose to take so as not to unintentionally offend others. I am a work in progress.

I stand right alongside the apostle Paul when he states in his *Letter to the Romans* that sometimes he does not understand his own actions. He does not do what he wants but he does the very thing he hates. He wills what is right but then fails to do it. Small children are not fully capable of distinguishing between right and wrong. But as adults we know what to do. We just cannot seem to do it.

What is worse is that the closer we get to choosing the right thing to do, the greater it seems is the temptation to sin.

Our lesson from Romans pushes us to tell the truth about the ways that sin flourishes in spite of our best intentions. We work so hard for peace on a global scale but then remain in conflict with people we know. We work for justice and equity but sometimes we put limits in place when it starts to affect us personally. We want to be hospitable but often catch ourselves being suspicious of strangers.

But Paul does not simply diagnose the state of our souls. He names the cure.

At the end Paul asked the question – *Who will rescue us?* – and he answered with an exclamation at the end: *It is God through Jesus Christ our Lord who will save us from ourselves!* It is liberating to be able to name our sins. But true freedom comes from embracing God and his work of reconciliation.

If we were to read the entire *Declaration of Independence* then we would come to understand that these are radical claims that still speak to us more than 200 years later. Originally it was written to declare our independence from Great Britain but it achieved so much more. In its introduction it states that it is self-evident that all people are created equal. It affirms that all people are given by their Creator certain unalienable rights which I repeat once more include life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That sentence alone has been described as the most potent and consequential words in our history. It has come to represent a moral standard to which the United States should strive. It is the basic principle by which we are to live.

And as people of faith who live in the United States of America we are to take each of those statements and do whatever we are called to do (by God through Christ) to honor the lives of others. In terms of the virus we will do what is asked of us so that others do not become sick. In terms of the civil unrest we will monitor our words and actions so that all people know they are valued and respected. We will share in our freedoms. We will do what we can to ensure all people are treated the same. And the happiness that we are invited to pursue is not self-satisfaction but rather a life lived to its full potential. (a life that flourishes). We will rejoice when others succeed.

The *Declaration of Independence* is not a Christian document. But as Christians we take each of these statements and turn them around to show the world our love of God and neighbor. Within this context we pray for God to bless America. Amen