

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Romans 7:14-24

"Free or Not?"

Freedom is a powerful idea, an American value, God's gift to everyone, "the longing of the soul," as President Bush said in his 2nd Inaugural. It's a key Christian concept, as we saw when we asked what Jesus did for us in dying on the cross. One powerful New Testament image is that he "freed the prisoners," and in fact Jesus himself said right at the start that this was part of his mission (Lk 4). But we need to come back around this issue one more time and ask "freed from what?"

1) In The Image of God

To answer that, we have to start with the way the Bible describes human beings: in *Genesis* we are told that we are made "in the image of God." What does that mean? Many definitions have been given: a modern one I like says the image consists of four human attributes, of *Reason, Righteousness, Relationship and Rule* (R. Anderson, *On Being Human*). *Reason* mirrors the rationality of God, and allows us to communicate with him. *Righteousness* means we make moral choices, and mirror the holiness of God. *Relationship* means we interact meaningfully with other people, and mirrors the love that unites Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Rule* means we care for the earth, and reflects the sovereignty of God.

If that is how we were made in the beginning how did we get into the mess we are in now?

We call what happened "*the Fall*;" our earliest parents distrusted and disobeyed God, and the consequences were disastrous: alienation from God and one another, violence, deceit, envy, social chaos. What happened to the "image of God" in humans? Some say it was obliterated - we have become merely large-brained animals. Some say it was defaced so badly it became unrecognizable, some say it was only slightly damaged, some say it is still more-or-less intact, but is now "facing away from God."

If these ideas seem abstract, they are not; they still affect our lives, personal and public, in profound ways. Consider the question whether our *rationality* has fallen. Can we still rely on reason? We all act as though we can! In fact, we trust it too much! The past 400 years of Western history have pitted *reason against revelation*, and claimed that we can only rely on what we can detect with our senses and discuss in rational terms. So science is held up as truth, faith is debunked as wishful thinking. I can testify from 30 years in research that human reason is as fallen as our wills and emotions! Scientists are as driven by ego, the need for recognition, praise, reward; care as much about reputations and career and grants and awards as anyone else. Scientific views are often held tenaciously and defended vigorously by people who are personally invested in them.

We did not need Freud to tell us that we often act on the basis of buried urges, desires, fears; that we are not nearly as rational as we suppose! And the literary "deconstructionists" who for 25 years have told us "every text is a pretext," that all expressions of values and beliefs and claims to know the truth are merely power plays, are of course to a degree correct. Science, and theology, at least believe that *there is an objective Truth* to be discovered, even if its practitioners too often fool themselves that *they have found* the best approximation to it! But we misunderstand ourselves, our world, and God far too often, because human reason is not only limited, it is also perverse!

The fall of human rationality plays out in theology. Does reason provide another way of finding God, independent of revelation? Historically that was frequently claimed: there were "philosophical proofs" for the existence of God. Those are now largely dismissed, but live on - for example, in the "Intelligent Design" movement, which claims to find the fingerprints of God in biological systems. But if human reason is as fallen as human will and emotion and affections, we should we forgiven for doubting that we will ever be able to get inferences about "Design" right.

But can we read at least some of the character of God from nature, or from human conscience? Is there such a thing as "Natural Theology"? That issue has come back in a big way in American culture in the past 25 years. If Christians want to influence the culture, they have been told (wrongly, I believe) that in the public square they must use common language that does not appeal to their faith. So we hear arguments that there are some ethical principles that "everyone knows," simply by virtue of being human - respect for human life, etc. But in fact that doesn't seem to work too well - many people do *not* respect human life, and

can see no reason to do so. Reason won't get us to agreed-on ethical positions - we need revealed truths like "being made in the image of God" to give a basis for human rights.

2) Free Will?

Closely related to the fall of reason is the question of whether we have free will. (I'm *not* here talking about human freedom *vs.* God's sovereignty, although that is certainly in the background). Do we choose and act freely, or are we bound in ways we don't realize? That matters: for example, if we are free to choose, then *education* about our choices, anything that expands our understanding, will presumably lead to a better society. But in fact, the idea that "*if we teach people what is right, they will do it*" turns out to be wrong, as any teacher or coach or trainer or pastor will tell you! Education (as we too often understand it: conveying information) is very limited in its effect on character, on values, on choices.

At root lies the problem that *our decisions are not free*. We do not sit down and calculate what is best and then do it. That's why economics is such a "dismal" failure - free market economics assumes rational buyers and sellers; in fact markets are dominated by issues of trust and confidence, as we now know only too well! Modern theories of medical ethics are fatally flawed by the assumption that patients are free, autonomous individuals who make rational decisions on their care: in reality they are social beings who are part of large human networks, and their decisions have an impact on and are influenced by those relational networks and a host of non-rational factors, including love, fear, and spiritual values.

The question of *how free we are* goes back a very long way, of course, and took classic theological shape in the great 5th century

debate between Augustine and Pelagius. Augustine was sure that we are fallen in mind, body, soul, will, emotions... that we are still free to choose, and make real choices, but that our will is weakened and incapacitated, and our thinking is clouded, by sin. He believed in free will, but "free will distorted by sin." He famously suggested the analogy of a pair of scales – we may think we weigh good and evil choices correctly in making our decisions, but in fact *the scales are seriously weighted in favor of evil!*

Pelagius, the British monk, fiercely disputed Augustine's reasoning. He believed in the total freedom of the human will, with no bias in it. So every person, he said, is self-sufficient, self-determining, and personally responsible for his own sin which he has freely chosen. He has no incapacity, and can if he wishes obey all God's commands – to deny that is to make God unjust! So all sin was to Pelagius a willful act against God. He believed there was no limit to human powers of self-improvement. He also insisted that only the morally pure could be part of the Church.

Now if to some of you this seems far-fetched, you have to realize that Pelagianism is alive and well today! If "*unlimited human powers of self-improvement*" doesn't ring a bell, then go look in your nearest bookstore, or tune in your TV on Sunday mornings! If you have never met someone who thinks "*church is for the righteous,*" you haven't been paying attention (or maybe you've sometimes thought that way yourself)! If you have never met people who are sure they are right with God because they have "*confessed all known sin,*" then tune in your TV on Sunday mornings! Pelagianism has long infected the Church and still does.

Of course I believe Augustine (and Calvin, after him) was right, based on the Bible and on experience. "*Original Sin*" is real, and our

wills and our minds and our emotions are *not free* in the way we imagine! As Paul the Christian Apostle and theologian knew, "*we fail to do the good we know and approve, and do the evil we disapprove*" (Rom 7); there is a power at work in us that even we ourselves can stand back from and recognize! Augustine had several metaphors for our fallen state: we have an *inherited disease* (think of babies getting HIV infection from their mothers); we are *held captive* by dark forces within and without; we *bear guilt* before God which is passed on from generation to generation. Overall, *we commit individual sins because we are sinners!*

Therefore, said Augustine, to deal with *sin* (not just with our sins) we need the grace of God which reaches down to us in the person of Jesus to heal our diseases, to liberate us from our prisons, to forgive us our sin. God treats us better than we deserve (Mt 20), and *the grace of God and faith in Jesus Christ free us from "original sin."* And of course they also free us from guilt for all the individual sins that we commit by action or inaction and transgressing God's Law. "*When the Son sets you free, then you are free indeed!*" (Jn 8).

3) Are We Free?

"OK - *so what?*" is the question I have told you to ask about all theological statements! Where does the rubber hit the road for me as a Christian or a seeker or a skeptic in all this complicated "God-talk"?

Do we know that self-improvement strategies will disappoint and defeat us? Do we know that "known sins" are only the tip of the iceberg of what is wrong with us? Do we still believe the lies that abound in our culture? Are we able to discern the truth, whether we are listening to a theologian or a politician or an advertiser? Do we recognize that there are forces at work in our culture that are ever ready to exploit our fallen

reason and will and emotions, and to manipulate us by appealing to our fallenness? Do we know that advertising is designed to stimulate our envy and greed? Do we know that *the "market" is not free*, and that the scales are weighted towards evil? Do we know that evil erupts all the time because it is deep-seated in every human being?

Do we understand what Alexander Solzhenitsyn learned from his long and brutal imprisonment in the Soviet Gulag? – to paraphrase, *"thank you, prison, for teaching me that the line between good and evil does not lie along the boundary of nations, or between one political party and another, or along the prison wall, but straight through the middle of every human heart."*

Do we know that the only way to be healed of our universal "bias towards evil" is the grace of God in Jesus Christ, that the only way to be *"healed [is] by his wounds"* (Is 53)? Do we know that the Church is a place for sinners who admit they need grace, and not a showcase for moral people who think they don't need any help? (Or are you like the person who objected to a pastor friend of mine that they did not like the "Prayer of Confession" that was said every Sunday in their Worship Service, because *"I don't do any of those things"*)?

Jesus Christ sets us free – fully and immediately in the sight of God, and also begins to free us within ourselves as we embrace his will and his way, his Spirit and his Word, his truth and his life. *"The truth will set you free,"* said Jesus, as we learn the truth about who we are, and who God is, and embrace the grace and mercy of the one who said *"I am the truth."*

Let us pray...