

July 4, 2021  
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

“Wonderfully Not Free”

Mark 6:1-13, Ezekiel 2:1-5

*“[Jesus] went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, ‘Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him.”*

Why do they take offense at Jesus? Well, Luke’s gospel fills in some details. In the synagogue Jesus reads a messianic passage from the prophet Isaiah and claims it is fulfilled in Himself and He chides those gathered for their unbelief. But what is crystal clear is the folks in Nazareth can’t comprehend Jesus as Lord and messiah in large part because Jesus grew up among them in Nazareth. They’re accustomed to Jesus being something else; a carpenter’s son. Jesus calls on them with signs and wonders to receive Him as something radically different from what they’re used to, and they just can’t do it. Forget about messiah—they won’t even receive Him as a mere prophet! We look at them and pity them; think they’re being foolish. But today of all days, I wonder if we have the same problem

Today is Independence Day! If I asked you to name one word (other than independence) that describes what we celebrate this day that word would be...freedom! Right? We love that a bunch of people rose up and told King George to take a hike and founded this country based on the idea that people should be free to live their own lives, prosper and thrive without a tyrannical government overlord authority dictating oppressive restrictions, taxes and controls. We love that our basic human rights are enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and shall not be infringed upon. We love that (within reason) we’re free to do whatever we want and must submit to no one. I know I love that about ‘Merica!

We’re used to this. We grew up celebrating this and we’re passionate about it. Seriously, how many of you would be eager to debate me right now if I started preaching about how much better Cuba or China is? I’m sure some of you veterans would be willing to take it beyond words! (Thank you for your service.) We are accustomed to freedom as a right, a virtue, a way of life.

But St. Paul writes in Romans 6: *“What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”* A couple verses later he makes it real plain saying, *“You have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.”*

Doh! Slaves of God! There goes that freedom! We don’t like that! God’s free gift of grace? Sure! Forgiveness, life and salvation? Well, of course! The robe of Christ’s righteousness? You bet we’ll wear that! Lose your freedom to submit to God’s will? Now hold on there partner. Let’s be reasonable here. Don’t go overboard because I’m free to decide my own path. I have rights. We’re accustomed to freedom. We take offense at slavery to God.

We're so habituated to dealing with this world according to our autonomy and freedom, when Jesus comes along claiming to be our Lord, our King, the One who has purchased us body and soul as His possession by His blood and we are now His—completely His—as slaves—we rail against it. We take offense. In that, we're not so different from those folks in Nazareth.

Jesus was making a radical claim in Nazareth and they took offense at Him and rejected Him. The claim Jesus makes upon us is no less radical. St. Paul sums it up nicely when he writes, "*You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.*" You are not free. You have been purchased and belong completely to your master, your Lord.

Does that make you uncomfortable? Is there a part of you squirming inwardly in the pew, grinding against the idea that somebody else is completely in charge of you, owns you? Perhaps you've already started thinking about those areas and situations in your life where you know that you're acting as the one in charge because there just is no way Jesus would be allowing that kind of behavior on His watch...yet you want to keep it that way! There is a word for all that too: it's called "rebellion". It's where we stand in our sins. And weirdly enough, it's the thing we're celebrating today: rebellion.

But here's the thing folks; King George—he could be beat. His was a mere earthly kingdom that one day passes away...just like our beloved United States of America. King Jesus—He has already won the war by His death and resurrection. He is ruling forever at the right hand of the Father. He isn't going to be beat. Standing in rebellion against His Lordship over you is folly.

These words are as true for pastors to congregations today as they were for Ezekiel to Israel: "*Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day.*"

But here's the other thing folks, unlike the kings, presidents, dictators, and despots whose goal it is to crush rebels and punish those who dared oppose them, Jesus' delight is in receiving rebels with full forgiveness and pardon, even glorifying them in His eternal kingdom. Lord Jesus rules with divine grace, longing to pour out His love and blessings forever on those who turn from their rebellion to beg His pardon at the foot of His cross. Jesus lived among and then died at the hands of rebellious Israel that He might show grace to the rebellious and show mercy to the condemned.

So today, if you wish to celebrate the independence won by America's revolution, go ahead and do so with thanksgiving to God. After all, He is in charge and that revolution only succeeded because it served His purposes for this world leading up to His eminent return.

But as for you, your body and soul, fellow rebels, today is the day to surrender to the Lord, the master, the one to whom you belong, indeed, to whom you are a slave. I know, it seems a shameful thing. We're accustomed to freedom, just as the Nazarenes were accustomed to Jesus being nothing more than a carpenter. But neither stands true in light of the radical call of the crucified and risen Son of God.

Nazareth was wrong. Jesus isn't a carpenter. His work by the wood of the cross means He reigns as Lord forever.

And, painful as it is to accept, you are not free. Being a rebel against your Lord doesn't make you free, it just means you're proudly standing against Him as a slave to sin and the world, doomed to the death and judgment they inherit.

Or, surrendering to His grace, you are a slave to Christ and, as a pardoned rebel, living in His kingdom of steadfast love forever.

Don't make the mistake of thinking Jesus something less than He is. You are His possession. Wherever you are rebelling, repent and surrender. The victory is His, and your King has graciously invited you by the Gospel to reign with Him in glory forever. Only a fool would seek independence from such divine mercy and love.

Amen.