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Sermon

July 5th, Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

To Jesus Christ, who washed our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen! The Word of the LORD which forms a portion for our sermon text this morning comes from Romans, chapter 14, beginning with verse 7:

In fact, not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself. ⁸ Indeed, if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ For this reason he died, rose, and lived, to be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ But you, why do you pass judgment on your brother? And you, why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹ Indeed, it is written: As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will acknowledge God. ¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, resolve never to put an obstacle or a snare in the path of your brother. ¹⁴ I know, and I am convinced in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in and of itself, but it becomes unclean for the one who considers it to be unclean. ¹⁵ For example, if your brother is offended because of the food you eat, you are no longer walking in line with love. Do not destroy that person for whom Christ died by the food you eat! ¹⁶ So do not give others a reason to speak evil about what you consider good. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God does not consist of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Certainly a person who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and has the approval of people. ¹⁹ Consequently, let us pursue those things that lead to peace and building up one another.

A Declaration of Independence

- I. Live free or die ...TO THE LORD!
- II. Independent...AND ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD!
- III. The pursuit of happiness...SECONDARY TO THE PURSUIT OF EDIFICATION!

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...

Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and from your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed

Independence. Freedom. Liberty. These are all ideas we associate with the 4th of July. We celebrate and observe this date because it was the day when America became a country. On July 4th, 1776, our founding fathers signed the declaration of independence, and our nation was born.

When we declared ourselves independent, our eventual 3rd President, Thomas Jefferson, wrote on behalf of this newly formed nation, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created

equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Wouldn't you agree? We Americans treasure our freedoms and we will not tolerate anyone infringing on them. We love being free, to live the way that we want to. That is the spirit of freedom that runs through this country.

Yet, just because we can do something, doesn't necessarily mean that we should. You are free to do a

lot of things in America. You are free to eat McDonald's every day of the week. But that wouldn't be healthy or cheap. You are free to never go to the dentist, but then you would eventually be free from your teeth. You are free to stay up late into the morning hours, but that freedom from sleep would catch up to you. These things might be seen by some as their own "pursuit of happiness", but in the long run, they are really just bad decisions. Just because we are free to do something doesn't mean that we should.

Paul here is talking about the same thing. The Roman congregation was a mixed bunch, and they were confused as to what they were now free to do and not to do. The overriding attitude that should steer that conversation, Paul reminds them and us, is love. When it comes to matters of opinion or matters of freedom, we are to let love rule. As Christians, we see a blessed truth. We are not independent, rather we are totally dependent on Jesus Christ! He is our Lord, and we are His disciples. We will, therefore, let His love be our guide! And so we pray MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATIONS OF OUR HEARTS BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT O LORD, OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER, AMEN!!!

In fact, not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself. 8 Indeed, if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

What Paul starts our text out with is in direct conflict with what so many believe in our country today. Paul says here that we are not our own...This is a strange and foreign idea to our American ears. "I am not my own? Isn't this America?"

Many people know the second sentence of the declaration of independence that I quoted earlier. But it is a fairly large document. If you go on to read it, most of it has to do with King George III and how he mistreated the 13 colonies. You would think that declaration would've meant war, but actually when the declaration was signed on July 4th, 1776, we had already been at war for over a year with the British. The founding fathers who signed this document knew

that it could result in their death. It was written proof of treason. They were patriots when the war ended. But if it would've ended differently, they would have all been hung as traitors.

We too were all engaged in a war of independence, Spiritual warfare. We threw off the yoke of sovereignty and submission in exchange for spiritual independence and freedom. They only problem was that we didn't rebel against a British King. No, we rebelled against the King of the Universe, the King of Kings, the LORD! When our spiritual founding father and mother, Adam and Eve, ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we all signed a declaration of independence from God. In so doing, we also signed our own death warrant. We all committed spiritual treason.

But God loved us anyway. Even when we were in open rebellion against Him, He sent forth His only begotten Son into the world to pay for our sins. As Paul says here, ⁹ **For this reason he died, rose, and lived, to be Lord of both the dead and the living.** He didn't live however He wanted to. He lived to serve. He died serving. He did it serving the Father and serving our spiritual betterment!

And yet, people still want to claim their own independence. They want to claim that they ought to be allowed to do with themselves as THEY deem fit, and as a result, all kinds of sins and misdeeds are committed. They say things like "a woman has a right to chose what she does with her own body!", or "what I am doing isn't hurting anyone", or "it's my money and my property, so I can decide to do whatever I want with it!"

You may have thought things like this before. After all, it's an American way to think. But what Paul says here is true, we aren't our own. When you think about it, if we are all our own and free to do anything we want, isn't that rather sad? If you are free to do whatever, then you are saying that ultimately you are in charge, and know more than God. That means that you are in fact worshipping yourself! Do you really want to be all on your own? Isn't it better to be a part of something bigger than yourself?

The fact of the matter is that we are Christ's, and He is ours! He paid a steep price for this... **1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.**

No longer are we on our own. We are Christ's! Now, whether we live or die, we live or die to the Lord! He paid the price to make us His. He shed His holy blood so that we could be one with Him. We are not our own, and this is a glorious comfort.

And of course, this means that we are not just accountable to ourselves alone, rather we accountable to God! **But you, why do you pass judgment on your brother? And you, why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.**

What was Paul referring to when he talks about here as "passing judgment on your brother"? In the context of this letter to the Romans, this congregation had been struggling with their newfound Christian freedom. They were made up of both newly converted Gentiles and reformed Judaists. There arose problems when it came to things that we call "adiaphora", that is things that Scripture neither commands nor condemns. The examples that Paul brings up in Romans is what to do in regards to the day of worship and what to do with eating meat.

What were these Romans supposed to do when it came to these and other matters? The point that Paul makes in these verses is that we shouldn't stand in judgment of our Christian brothers when it comes to matters of opinion. Matters of opinion don't matter. Why would we look down on someone for eating meat or refraining from eating meat? Why would you insist on a particular day of worship? At the end of the day, we are all going to kneel at Christ's feet... So why would we insist on things that aren't insisted on in God's Word?

We are independent to make our own decisions in our Christian liberty. This is not to say that we can do whatever we want. This is also not to say that we

shouldn't hold each other accountable. We should, but only on the basis of the Word of God!

When it comes to matters of freedom, we need to let love rule. Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should. Just because a fellow Christian does something that we do not approve of personally, if it isn't against the Word of God, we shouldn't think less of them. **I know, and I am convinced in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in and of itself, but it becomes unclean for the one who considers it to be unclean.** Maybe it's not right for you, but for them it is! At the end of the day, you are both servants to the LORD. A servant doesn't answer to his fellow servant. He answers to his Lord!

The lesson here from Paul is to let love have an advantage over personal preference. Again, this is not exactly how we tend to think in our land of the free, but this is how the Christian is to think! ¹⁵ **For example, if your brother is offended because of the food you eat, you are no longer walking in line with love. Do not destroy that person for whom Christ died by the food you eat!**

When Jefferson wrote those famous words down, he said a lot. But some have problems with it. Some will point out that he said "all men", and should've said "all people". I personally think that all men mean the same as all people, but some people don't agree.

But our problems with what he wrote is not a matter of semantics. Our problem is more about whether or not he was right about everything else... "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" We would totally agree with that. You can go ahead and change all men to all people, include that to mean every single person ever and it is still true. We are ALL created equal. **There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28 NKJ)** Jesus died for the sins of the world on the cross. We were all created in the image of God, we all rebelled and lost that image, and Christ died to restore that to us.

But what about the rest? "that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that

among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Are these truly our undeniable rights? Well, yes, strictly spiritually speaking. But physically? Life? Yes, you can make an argument that we all have the right to live. But this is not true for all of this in this country. There are many souls who lose their lives every day. This is done in the name of personal freedom and choice. Many mothers abort their babies' lives because "they have a right to do with their own bodies what they wish". Our country has declared that a mother's right takes precedence over life itself. This is truly sad.

And what about the right of liberty? Surely we would get on board with that right? No. God didn't say that all men are free. Think about all those who were born into slavery during the history of the world? Was that all a sin against God? No! God tells slaves to be **obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; (Eph 6:5 NKJ)** The governments that God appointed noticed how badly slaves were mistreated in this country and outlawed the practice, but slavery in and of itself wasn't sinful. The abuse of it was. Certainly, Thomas Jefferson didn't think that truly "all" had liberty, he himself being a slave owner.

And what about that ever ambiguous "pursuit of happiness"? Do you have an undeniable right to pursue happiness? Again, yes you do in a spiritual sense. But what exactly does that mean in practice in this world? You can do what makes you happy? I guess that is true, to an extent. But again, you can't just do whatever you want. "Why can't I pursue happiness however I want?" Well... there are these things called LAWS!!!

When it comes to what we are free to do, when it comes to things that aren't expressly against God's Holy Law, we need to let the love of Christ be our guide. This means that we need to put the love that Christ shows us and our neighbor be more important than our own personal freedom. As Jesus said in our Gospel this morning, **love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you** If we are to love those who hate us,

how should we treat those who are fellow heirs of Christ? The pursuit of happiness is all well and good. But do you know what pursuit is more important? ¹⁹ **Consequently, let us pursue those things that lead to peace and building up one another.**

What Paul is talking about here is that we need to think about our fellow Christians first before we think about our own freedoms. When it came to the matter of food, Paul knew that he had the freedom to freely eat anything. But he also knew that he had Christian brothers who were struggling with this new freedom. He said: **13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. 1 Corinthians 8:13**

And he makes the same point here as well. We are free to do many things. But what is more important: my personal freedom to do what I want, or my Christian brother's salvation? We can't put our freedom ahead of that and still be showing love! ¹⁵ **For example, if your brother is offended because of the food you eat, you are no longer walking in line with love. Do not destroy that person for whom Christ died by the food you eat!**

Paul is not just talking about food, he is using it "for example". I don't think many of us here today would have a problem witnessing someone eat or not eat meat. It's kinda a tradition when it comes to the 4th. We have barbeques. There is even a famous hot dog eating contest that happens every 4th of July. Would you be offended if someone in our congregation participated in that? Maybe we would never do something like competitive eating personally, but that Christian could be doing that to the LORD!

Let's bring this principle that Paul is talking about here a little bit closer to home. What about wearing masks and social distancing? We are instructed to do these things by the government, so we obey. Even though we may not like to do them, we do. I have my own opinions about how effective wearing a mask truly is, but if it helps my fellow believer feel safer about attending a worship service, wouldn't I do it regardless of how I feel? Shouldn't we do as Paul says here, **resolve never to put an obstacle or a snare in the path of your brother.**

It is hard to let love, peace, and the edification of our brethren come before my own personal rights and freedom. But this is what letting the love Christ rule means! **Philipians 2:3-5 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus**

The pursuit of happiness is important to all of us. But it is not the end all be all. Happiness is really relative, isn't it? What makes me happy may or may not make you happy. What is objective happiness? What makes everyone happy? Simple, the GOSPEL!!! The knowledge that our sins are forgiven and that we stand to inherit heaven as our eternal home, that is true happiness for the sinner. Paul doesn't say "let us pursue what makes us each happy". No, he says **let us pursue those things that lead to peace and building up one another**. That may mean giving up something that we fully have the right to do. But isn't it worth it?

The ultimate thing that leads to peace is the knowledge that faith provides. Through the Word and Sacrament, we have the reassurance that we are forgiven of our many and multiple transgression, and we now have the peace which surpasses all understanding. Real peace and true happiness are one and the same. Once you have peace over the guilt of your sins, then you have real lasting happiness!

Can we also pursue personal happiness? Sure! But we should first seek after the kingdom of God! Jesus said **Matthew 6:31-33 "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 "For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you**. If we seek first after the Kingdom of God, then the pursuit of happiness will naturally follow. Paul reminds us here that **the kingdom of God does not**

consist of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. That should be our top priority, and everything else, even if we are free to do, isn't as important.

When Jefferson wrote that declaration of independence and the founding fathers signed it, they officially started this country that we are blessed to live in today. We are all reminded of thankful we should be to them and to our God who appointed them and allowed us to live in this country of freedom.

But those self-evident truths? He was a bit off on those. To me, there is only one self-evident truth. It is one that we all know well. It's what Isaiah confessed when he saw the LORD in all His majesty... **"Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; (Isa 6:5 NKJ)**.

It should be self-evident to everyone that they are sinners and will be one day accountable for all the evil they have done. This self-evident truth is what we call the natural knowledge of God. It is built into every one. People will try to deny it as loud and as hard as they can, but everyone knows in their core that there is a God and they have sinned against Him. But that self-evident condemnation is turned upside down with the revealed knowledge of God! It is the Gospel, the beauty that Christ came into this world to pay for our sins! We are members of the glorious heavenly country, and that is where are headed because of Jesus' work of atonement.

So how should we live until we get there? **LET FREEDOM REIGN!!!** Let others know that they too have been set free by Jesus. Set aside your own Christian freedom when it comes in the way of salvation. Instead of pursuing momentary happiness in this world, let us instead pursue the things that lead to peace and building up of one another! Jesus loved you so much that He died for you! Let us always let that love that He had for us rule in our hearts and minds in everything we do! **AMEN!!!**