

3 July 2005
Pentecost 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Freedom of the Gospel”

Text: Matthew 11:25-30; Romans 7:15-25a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tomorrow is Independence Day, the day when, 229 years ago, a document was signed, proclaiming our country's independence from the rule of the King of England, and the burdens and taxes he had placed upon the people of this country. But when the Declaration of Independence was signed, that did not mean the end of the struggle for this country – it was, in fact, just the beginning. The Revolutionary War, begun at Lexington and Concord, raged on, and even when the British surrendered at Yorktown, the struggle was not ended. Now, a great new struggle would begin. The struggle to learn what it meant to be free. The struggle to learn what it meant to be an American.

The last two Sundays we have been considering the opposition and struggle we will face as Christians in this life, walking against the crowd and the ways of this world. It is not easy. Satan, who ruled us with his tyranny and burden, would not surrender, but he was defeated through the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ. The Son of God become man won the victory over sin, death, and the devil for us, and so from these foes we are free! But that freedom doesn't mean that our life is now easy and carefree. Once we are made Christians and adopted into the family of Christ, things do not automatically get better. No – just like with our country, the victory means that a great new struggle begins. The struggle to learn what it means to be free in Christ. The struggle to learn what it means to be a Christian.

And this is what St. Paul is writing about in the Epistle from Romans we heard today. For up to this point in Romans, Paul has outlined the tyranny and slavery to sin that had burdened us. Then he spoke of the victory that we have in Christ Jesus; and then in Chapter Six (which we heard last week) he wrote of the good news that we have been adopted into the family of Christ through Holy Baptism. In those waters we are joined with Christ, have been born again, raised to a new life, given His victory, and now have a new identity as Christians through this water that binds us closer together than blood! By virtue of our baptism, we are a new creation.

And now . . . *what?* Or to ask a good Lutheran question: *what does this mean?* What does

this freedom mean for you and me? What does this new identity mean? And Paul writes very plainly – it means struggle. And so we heard: ***For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*** That is a struggle that we are all familiar with! The struggle to do the good we know we should do, and not do the evil we know we should not do! But how often do we lose that struggle? And it's not because we don't know. By and large, we do not sin in ignorance; and even if we *did* at one time, as Christians, learning the Word of God, studying the Catechism, and growing in the Word, we learn more and more of God's will for us, and what is pleasing to Him, and how we should live. And yet, like Paul, we do not do it. We want to, yes! We have the desire, but not the ability. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. We give in to the easy, to the convenient, to the pleasure. If it's something we don't want to do, *someone else will do it*; and if it's something we do want to do, *God will understand*. Besides, I know I'll be forgiven!

Those words sound awful, don't they? They somehow don't seem so bad when they remain in the thoughts of our minds and the desires of our hearts, but actually saying them out loud – what kind of Christians are we anyway? Is this how we use our freedom? Is this what it means to be a Christian? Certainly not! And so you know how St. Paul felt, as he then cried out: ***Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?***

Now to that question there are two answers. The first is the one we usually turn to right away, and that is that we turn to ourselves. *Who will deliver me from this body of death? I will!* And so we get more determined. OK, I have abused my Christian freedom, *but from now on . . . !* And we resolve to do better, and to clean up our thoughts, and not be so lazy, and desire only what is good, and help my neighbor more, and stop gossiping, and be content with what God has given me – and while all that is not bad, it's also not the answer. For soon enough, we find out again what we knew already: we have the desire, but not the ability. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And while maybe we feel a little better about ourselves for a bit, we inevitably wind up right back where we started: as wretched men and women. And so relying on ourselves is exactly what Satan wants us to do – to put ourselves back under the Law, back under the tremendous burdens that you cannot fulfill. It's like trying to walk up a down escalator. You can keep trying harder, but you just wind up wearing yourself out.

And when you get to that point, you get to the point where Paul was – and to the second answer; the answer that he wrote: ***Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*** And that, my friends, is what it means to be free. That it what it means to be a Christian. It is to know and believe that Jesus' death and resurrection didn't just win the battle for me in the past – when Jesus died on the cross, when He rose from the dead, and when I was baptized – but that He is

winning the battle for me each and every day of my life! It is to know and believe that Jesus' death and resurrection didn't just set me on the right path and now say, *OK kiddo, the rest is up to you!* – but that He is winning the victory for me each and every day of my life! It is to know and believe that I am a Christian *not by my own reason or strength*, but by His faith and strength; and that I am free not *because I am now independent*, but because I am dependent on my Saviour for everything. He has delivered me from this body and death, and He still continues to do so. Each and everyday, as I die and rise with Him. As I die to self and rise and live in Him. As I confess and repent my sins and all that I am, and receive from Him His forgiveness, life, and salvation. And so not just once, but each day, each hour, each moment, He sets me free. Each day, by His grace alone, He makes me a Christian, all over again.

And this is what Jesus also was speaking of in the Holy Gospel that we heard earlier, when He said: ***Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.***

All who labor and are heavy laden. *That's us. Laboring.* Relying on ourselves, trying answer #1 and trying to do it ourselves, trying to make ourselves better, trying to be that perfect Christian that God wants us to be, trying to get to the top of that down escalator and just wearing ourselves out. And ***heavy laden***. Burdened. Under the burden of trying to please the world; of doing what *they* say we should be doing, and living how *they* say we should be living; to live up to *expectations* and trying to be someone we're not. And you add it all up – and you see people being crushed every day. People here being crushed. You and me, being crushed. Crushed by the burden and demands of the Law. Crushed by the burdens and expectations of the world. Crushed by the “*power-of-positive-thinking, self-help, you-can-do-it, your-best-life-now, if it's going to be it's up to me*” lies and deceptions of Satan.

But then Jesus speaks of another yoke. One that is easy and light. It is the yoke not of the Law and what we must do, but the yoke of the Gospel, which steers us to Christ and what He has done ***for us***. The yoke that steers us to repentance and confession; the yoke that steers us to His Word of grace; the yoke that steers us to the Altar where we receive His body and blood. . . . And you know, at first, that yoke may seem heavy, because it's tough confessing your sins. It's hard admitting you're a failure, and that you cannot do the good that you want to do. And that's especially hard for pastors, who think they of all people *should* be able to do these things! **And it's hard because it's humbling.** Saying those sins *out loud* that are much more comfortable in my heart, where no one else knows about them! Falling on my knees and admitting I'm a failure, when it's much more comfortable letting everyone think I've got it together and doing pretty well on my own.

But when you're tired from the laboring, and crushed from the burden, and hungry and thirsty for the righteousness and life you cannot achieve, you find that our Lord's yoke is not heavy at all, but that our Lord's Words are true. **He gives rest.** For He is the One who labored **for you**, on the cross. He is the One who took your burden of sin off of you and placed it upon Himself. He is the One who let Himself be put in bonds – the bonds of sin and death – so that you could be set free. For His forgiveness lifts your burdens and sets you free. Free from the expectations. Free from the tyranny of the Law. Free from having to be a success. Free from having to be someone you're not. Free, **because when the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.** (John 8:36) And you have rest for your soul.

And this is what it means to live as a Christian. It is to live in the freedom of the Gospel of forgiveness. To know and believe that you don't have to do it, but that Christ has done it for you – and therefore you have rest for your soul. That is why Luther wrote in the very first of his 95 theses that *when our Lord Jesus Christ said repent, He willed that the entire life of the Christian be one of repentance.* Because that is the yoke of the Lord that gives us rest, for that is the yoke that leads us to Him, and the freedom that is found only in Him and His forgiveness. Take that yoke upon you, and you will find the rest you have been seeking.

But I must tell you one more thing – a friendly warning, if you will, which you would find out soon enough, if you don't know it already – that when your soul is at rest, that doesn't mean you aren't doing anything! In fact, it means the very opposite! For when your soul is at rest, your body now becomes very alive and active – not in sin and not in trying to get yourself better. For when your soul is at rest, you forget about yourself. For you have confidence and peace – the peace of forgiveness and knowing that Jesus' perfection is now your perfection. No, now your body becomes very alive and active in serving others – not because you have to, but because you can. Not serving them for yourself, but truly serving them. You will not be able to help yourself. It is like waking up in the morning after a good night's rest – but since you have already been given everything in your Saviour Jesus Christ and need nothing, what you do you now do for others. And then you know, in a small way, the joy that Christ had in serving you, and laying down His life for you. He wants you to have that same joy, and so He has set you free and given you rest, that you might know what it means to be a Christian. A little Christ. A child of God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.