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Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Forgiveness and Freedom”

Text: Romans 7:14-25a; Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 11:25-30

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

In the verses we heard from Romans today, Paul doesn't just sound like a sinner, but an addict. Someone in bondage. He sounds like the **gambler** who knows he shouldn't play with the rent money. He knows what he *should* do, but he can't; he can't resist. He sounds like the **alcoholic** who knows he should walk past the bar and go home to his family. He knows what he *should* do, but he can't; he can't resist. He sounds like the man who neglects his family and works too much. He sounds like the child lying to her parents. He sounds like the wife compulsively shopping. He sounds like . . . *us*. He knows what he should do. He knows that what he is doing is wrong, BUT. But. Such a little word that is oh, so big. BUT . . .

It's not an excuse. Doesn't make it right. Paul knows that. We know that. He wants to do what is right. He doesn't want to be ruled by what he knows is wrong. He tries to resist. But he is not strong enough. Something has a hold on him. And he doesn't like it. And yet he can't seem to get rid of it. *What's wrong with him?*

But he's not the only one. Paul's story is **Cain's** story, knowing that he should be his brother's keeper, and yet overcome with jealousy and rage instead. Paul's story is the story of **Joseph's brothers**, who know they shouldn't sell him into slavery but do it anyway. Paul's story is **David's** story, who knows he shouldn't be looking at his neighbor's wife, bathing on the roof next to him, but who keeps looking anyway, and then acts on his lust and winds up a murderer. Paul's story is **Peter's** story, who knows he shouldn't deny Jesus, BUT . . . There's that word again. But . . .

And Paul's story is **your** story. I don't know what Paul's addiction was. And I don't know what yours is. But you do. And I know my own. *What is it for you?* What sin, what addiction, what bondage that keeps popping up in your life, but you can't seem to get rid of. It may be a deed, or an activity. It could also be a desire, or pride. Maybe for you it's a person, or an achievement that has a hold on you.

It may not be illegal. In fact, it probably isn't. It may not even be wrong in the eyes of the world. In fact, it probably isn't. People may look at you and think: what a good person! Better than most. But you know the truth. The ugly truth. That *that's* not true at all. You're an addict. It may not be illegal, it may not even be wrong in the eyes of the world, but it has become what you love so much, what you want so much, that it displaces God in your heart

and life. And so it's an idol, making you, at times, push family aside, marriage aside, church aside, God aside, and serve yourself, your idol, instead. It's the elephant - not in the room - but in your heart. A mammoth of sin, that keeps reappearing. *What is it for you?*

And it can be exhausting. Trying to serve it, trying to cover it up so no one knows, trying to fight it and overcome it. It wears you out because it's so strong and you're so weak. And you don't want to be weak - you want to be strong, and that just wears you out more and makes you weaker! It's a wicked cycle. Just the way satan has set it up for you. To keep you in its grip. To keep you in *his* grip.

So finally Paul, at the end of his rope, blurts out: *Ach! Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* Maybe you've been there and know his cry. Maybe you haven't yet - but you will. No one is immune. Wretched man that I am! Wretched man, wretched woman, wretched child that you are! Who will rescue you?

You know the answer, but let me read it for you anyway:

***Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.***

Now, I don't think those are the words you were expecting to hear! But maybe they were the words Paul had in mind when he wrote his answer: ***Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*** Thanks be to God, through the one who rode into Jerusalem that day, humble, lowly, and looking like anything but a conquering king. And yet that's exactly what He was, and what He was doing. He came ***having salvation***, Zechariah says. Your salvation. The deliverance from your bondage. The freedom from your addiction, your idols, your sin. No one less than the King Himself came to rescue you from your body of death, for no one less than the King could.

We usually talk about what Jesus did for us in terms of forgiveness - and that's certainly true. You are forgiven the guilt of all your sin. Done. But that's not all. Jesus doesn't forgive just to have you go back to the same sin again - but to set you free from that sin, from that burden, that bondage, from that heavy yoke of your addiction that is taking you where you do not want to go. *And so give you rest*. Rest from the pride that makes you try to cover it up so that no one knows. Rest from the despair that makes you wallow in it and think you'll never be good enough. Rest from the struggle to try to overcome it yourself. Rest, to see *in Jesus* the only way out.

Addiction programs like AA and others often have "12 step" programs - kind of a ladder you can climb up and out of your addiction and make up for it. I'm sure you've heard of

them; maybe even been there yourself. But for Paul, there aren't 12 steps, but only one. But it's a big one! The step the Son of God took, coming down from heaven and all the way down to us, to you, in the depth of your sin and addiction, to set you free. The steps He took in freeing people from disease, demons, and death. The steps He took to the cross. And then the step He would NOT take - the one down and off of the cross. He let the bonds that hold us hold Him, so that He could break them, once and for all, with His resurrection. That you be forgiven and free.

So ***Come to me***, Jesus says, ***all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest***. Rest for us burdened by guilt, under a mountain of sin, with piles of regret, and a crushing load of failure. Look! Jesus says from the cross. It's all on me. All of it. Every last sin, every iota of your guilt and failure. And if it's on me, it's not on you.

So now ***take my yoke upon you, and learn from me*** - learn all that I have done for you! - ***for I am gentle and lowly in heart*** - like when I rode that donkey into Jerusalem - ***and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light***.

So two quite different yokes. One **heavy**, leading you down a path you don't want to go but are not able to resist. So it controls you and drives you. But other is **light**, leading you to salvation, a path you *want* to go down, but are not able by yourself. So your Saviour leads you and brings you with Him. Which do you think is better? Which do you want?

And if you're thinking that better than either of those is to have no yoke at all - to throw off all the shackles of this world and the Church and just be my on my own and be my own person . . . that's not freedom. What you'll wind up doing is following your own urges and desires and being a slave to them, under their yoke. And so back under the heavy yoke of addiction to sin.

So while Paul's story is our story, what Jesus has done is made **His** story our story. A better story, with a better ending.

So when you are **baptized**, Jesus' story becomes your story - you become a son of God, receive His Spirit, and die and rise with Him. **So that's where your life now is**, not in an addiction that only robs you of life.

And when you are **absolved**, Jesus' story becomes your story as His words from the cross are spoken to you: *Father, forgive them*. **So that's where your life now is**. You don't have to feed an addiction to feel good about yourself.

And when you **feed** on Jesus' Body and Blood, His story becomes your story - **that's where your life now is**, that partaking of this new and greater passover, you pass over - already here and now - to a new life, a truly free life. To step over, or maybe even on, whatever it is that is addicting, holding, you.

So while Paul's story and your story are the *ugly* truth, so too in receiving Jesus' story, you have a *beautiful* truth, and a saving truth. That you are not defined by your sin, but by your Saviour. Not by what you do or have done, but by what He has done for you.

So I think . . . this chapter, these words, must have been really hard for Paul to write. To admit his addiction, his sin, his weakness, his failure. He had been such a strong and successful man, looked up to by all. Until he saw something different. Until he saw what was real. Experts say that to be able to identify a counterfeit, you don't study counterfeits - you study and know the real thing, so that when you see a fake, it sticks out like a sore thumb. So only when Paul saw the real thing, saw Christ and His life and love, did he see his life for what it really was: *fake*. That he was not a good man, but a wretched man. And that he needed to repent and turn away from all that he was, all that he had been doing, and rely instead on Christ.

For only after being exposed, all his efforts crushed, did Jesus' forgiveness and freedom then taste so sweet. Paul drank of that, and rejoiced! It completely changed him. And he wants that for you. And Jesus, too, wants that for you, of course! That's why He came. And comes now. So while its hard for us, too, to admit our addiction, our sin, our weakness, our failure, and to repent, to do so means rest from your labors; rest in Christ. So that you, too, can rejoice, and, as Zechariah put it, be *a prisoner* no longer of addiction, but *a prisoner of hope*. To the Lord who *restores to you double*. Both forgiveness and freedom. Both faith and love. He gives you the forgiveness and faith that gives you life, and the freedom and love to live that new life, to no longer be in bondage to serve your addiction or your sin, but to serve your neighbor in love. Like Christ. For His life is real life, and His love real love.

And on this Independence Day weekend, this weekend we celebrate our freedom, *that* freedom, Paul would tell you, is the freedom we need. And the greatest freedom of all.

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.