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Pentecost 5

Our Saviour/St. Stephen
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Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I want to preface this sermon today by saying that this sermon will be more along the lines of a lecture than an exhortation, so it may appear to be a bit drier than usual.

I hope that will not be the case, but I thought I better throw that out there in advance, just in case.

PAUSE

And, with that said, I want to begin this sermon by saying that there is lie that we, as human beings, tell ourselves, especially in this country.

There is a big fat lie that we, as people, like to tell ourselves.

And it is a lie that is all the more obvious at this particular time of year.

For in only two days' time, we will be celebrating July 4th.

And, we will be having cookouts and our outdoor picnics.

And, we will be shooting off fireworks and waving our American flags.

And, we will be wear our patriotic colors—red, white, and blue.

And, we will be celebrating our nation's independence.

Yes, on July 4th we will be celebrating the fact that we are the "land of the free."

Our country is "the land of the free."

PAUSE

Now, I say that is a lie NOT to be political.

I say that NOT because I am somehow unpatriotic.

Quite the contrary, I love this great country of ours.

But I say that it is a lie, because as the apostle Paul tells us in our reading from Romans, none of us is truly free, at least as it relates to our spiritual selves.

Sure, we are the greatest country in the world because we do not put up with even the smallest amount of tyranny.

Sure, we are the greatest country in the world because the citizens of this country have the best opportunities in life, the greatest potential to become whatever it is they hope to become, and to live in whatever way they would hope to live, within reason.

Yes, we are the greatest country, the freest county in that respect.

But, the apostle Paul would tells us, that when it comes to one's spirituality, none of us is truly free.

So, don't blame it on me.

Don't shoot the messenger.

I'm just relaying what the apostle Paul said.

For in our reading today from Romans, the apostle Paul says that we are either slaves to sin, or we are slaves to righteousness.

We are either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness—those are the only two options.

In other words, none of us is truly free, at least not when it comes to our spiritual selves.

Every person, and I mean every person, both in here and out there in the world has committed their lives to something, so that they are a slave to something.

Whether we, or the people out there, would acknowledge that fact...

Whether we, or the people out there, are aware of that fact...

It still doesn't change the fact that it is true.

Every person is a slave to something.

PAUSE

Some have committed themselves to the almighty dollar, and to the entitlement that comes with affluence, and so their life is bent on making money and obtaining every possession and liberty money can buy.

But make no mistake about, money does not buy freedom.

Quite the opposite in fact, the pursuit of money and the pursuit of all that glitters and shines makes us a slave to money.

PAUSE

And then there are some who have committed themselves to obtaining position and status at all costs, and so their life is bent on aspiring to positions of authority and holding onto those positions of authority come hell or high water.

And make no mistake about it, these persons too, are slaves, slaves to the need for power.

PAUSE

And then there are some who have committed themselves to pleasure, and so their life is bent on obtaining everything that makes them feel good—food, sex, drugs, alcohol, you name it.

The Greeks had a name for this—Epicureanism. Today, we just call it hedonism.

And so these persons are a slave to their own wanton desires.

And we could go like this, describing the various things to which people commit themselves.

But, then there are also some who have committed themselves to religion and to God, and they are bent on doing whatever is necessary to please God, doing whatever is RIGHT by God, and so it is these who are classified as slaves to RIGHT-eousness.

But make no mistake about it, even these persons, ourselves included, are slaves, too.

But, the slave to righteousness sees life a little differently.

Staying with me, so far? I did say this would be somewhat more of a lecture today.

PAUSE

Now, recently, we had a Bible Study (here) at Our Saviour, and the focus was on the Ten Commandments.

And I asked our Bible Study group, which of the Ten Commandments is the most important commandment.

And the group said, "The first." "Why?" I asked.

Because if we follow the First Commandment perfectly, we have no need of the other commandments.

Follow the First Commandment perfectly, "Thou shall have no other gods before me," and you don't need the other commandments.

Because all the other commandments are ways in which we make other things into gods.

The Fifth Commandment, for example—"Thou shall not kill"—is about how we make power into a god, because to kill another person physically, or to kill their self-esteem, or to kill their hope, is to lord it over that other person.

Thus, power is the false god the Fifth Commandment seeks to refute.

The Seventh Commandment—"Thou shall not steal"—is about how we make possessions and entitlement into a god, because to steal from another person is to say I am more deserving of what you have, and I will take what you have.

And so, wealth or entitlement is the false god the Seventh Commandment seeks to refute.

And we can do this with all other commandments.

The Second Commandment is about God's name, and the false god refuted there is fame and arrogance, because we think our name is more important than God's.

The Third Commandment is about the not working on the Sabbath, and so the false god refuted there is work-a-holism.

Even family, which is what the Fourth Commandment, Honor thy Father and thy Mother, is about...

Yes, even family can become a false god.

And we probably know of persons who have no identify themselves apart from their family, so enmeshed with their family are some individuals.

This enmeshment with one's family is what psychologists call the undifferentiated self.

So, yes, even family which we often lift up as the end all be all good after our religious life—but even family can become a false god.

So, the Commandments powerfully reveal to us the way in which we make other things into gods.

And that is why, if we were able to follow the First Commandment perfectly—“having no other gods”—we would not need the other nine commandments.

Still with me?

But, sisters and brothers, to follow the First Commandment means that even then we are not absolutely free, because we have committed ourselves to God.

But this, mind you, is the best of all the other possible scenarios, as I will explain in a moment.

So, as I said, every person, I mean every person in here and out there in the world has committed their life to some thing.

It is unavoidable.

And as I have said it once, so I will say it again, if you want to truly know person, and know yourself, consider what it is to which that other person, or yourself, has committed their life.

Sometimes a person's god is quite visible.

You see it in what they value. You see it in how they spend their time and their money.

You see it in one's checkbook, what we spend our money on.

You see it in one's calendar, what we give your time to?

But Martin Luther had another means of identifying one's god.

Luther said that that which we turn to in our most dire of need, that is our god.

So, when the chips are down, if you resort to eating, if your coping mechanism is food, well then that is your god.

Or, if you are facing difficult trials in your life, and you resort to say retail therapy, shopping, well then that is your god.

What we turn to in our most dire of need—that is our god.

Still with me?

PAUSE

And what do any of these false gods want with our life?

What do they seek? Control.

They want control of our lives, and we give them that control when we succumb to their allure, when we are drawn in by their falsehood so as to think that it will satisfy us.

But even God wants control of our lives.

In this way, God is no different than any of these other false gods.

But where God is different is that God does not want control of our lives so as to dominate our lives. And this is where the rubber meets the road, so they say.

You see then, here is the difference.

You see, these false Gods want to dominate our lives, and the goal of any false god is to harm our relationships.

And so here is still another way to know if you are under the power of some false god; just consider if what you are doing is in some way hurting your relationship with god and/or hurting your relationship with others—family members, friends, your neighbors.

If your relationships are negatively impacted by some action you are doing, then you are probably following a false god.

And do note, that even an UN-healthy relationship with God and religion can hurt our relationships with others.

If our commitment to God and religion makes us arrogant and judgmental...

If our commitment to God and religion makes us conceited and condemning of others...

If our commitment to God and religion makes us come across as sanctimonious, as holier-than-thou...

Well, then our faith life itself has come to control our lives, as opposed to enriching our lives.

Worshipping the true God, committing our life to the true God, makes us, or should make us more loving toward God and other people.

And that is why the First Commandment if followed perfectly, if it is followed rightly, is the most important commandment.

All the others don't really matter.

But the other commandments are there in the list, and we need to be mindful of them, because we know then of the ways in which we make other things into false gods.

Still with me?

PAUSE

Finally, then, to wrap this up. I want to go back to Paul's words in Romans.

He writes, "You are slaves," Paul says, "You are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin (and those false gods outlined in the Ten Commandments), or you are a slave of obedience, which leads to righteousness."

Paul goes on, "Thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves to sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."

"And now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification—SANCTIFICATION."

Sanctification being the process of becoming ever more holy, of becoming ever more god-like, of becoming ever more motivated by love—like God, who does all

things because of love, because God's self is love—and God alone then is truly free.

This then is our moral compass—the process of sanctification—to GROW IN LOVE for God and for the other person, and this narrows the gap toward what it means for us ultimately to be like God, and so be TRULY free, too. Thanks be to God. AMEN.