



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Romans 6:19-23 &

St. Mark 8:1-9

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A few minutes ago we heard the Old Testament lesson read from the last chapter of the book of Hosea; we heard the prophet calling the people back to their God. The people had turned their backs on God, they were worshipping idols and even offering their children as sacrifices on the altars of pagan gods. Instead of trusting God to take care of them as he had promised, they had thrown themselves into the game of imperial politics and had put their trust in their army and the armies of their pagan allies. Through Hosea, God call his covenant people back to himself. He did it by turning Hosea's life into a series of living object lessons, the best known of which took place when God told Hosea to take a prostitute, Gomer, for his wife. Repeatedly Gomer left him, going back to her life of prostitution, and repeatedly and lovingly, Hosea tracked her down, even buying back her freedom, and taking her back to his house to be his wife again.

There's a similarity here between Hosea and the familiar story of David and Bathsheba: how King David had an adulterous affair with the wife of one of his generals and then had that man murdered in the field so that he could take Bathsheba for himself. God revealed to the prophet Nathan what had happened and sent him to confront the King. Of course Nathan didn't do it outright. Instead he told David a story about a rich man with many sheep who stole the single lamb of a poor man. You'll remember that when David heard the story he was outraged and demanded to know who that man was so that he could see him brought to justice. And Nathan's response to him was, "You are that man!"

Hosea's message is similar. God speaks his message through the actions of Hosea, and then when the people hear the story and say, "What kind of moron would take

a prostitute for his wife and keep buying her back out of that life as she was continually unfaithful to him?" God says to them, "I'm that 'moron' and you're the prostitute! I brought you out of Egypt, I fed you in the desert, I conquered the Canaanites for you and gave you homes that you didn't build and an abundant harvest that you didn't plant, and yet you continually turn your back on me and play the harlot with false Gods and with the nations of the world." And so having given them that dramatic object lessons, Hosea calls the people back to their God:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all iniquity; accept that which is good and we will pay with bulls the fruit of our lips. Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. (Hosea 14:1-3)

But don't think that Hosea's warning was only meant for the ancient Israelites, because he could just as easily point his finger at us. God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, he lived and died for us so that we could be given new life and be restored to fellowship with God, and yet we repeatedly turn our backs on him. Our priorities are out of whack. We put everything else first, and feel good about ourselves if we're willing to give him an hour or two on Sunday morning. Instead of devoting our time, our talents, and our treasures to the one who gave them to us, we squander them on the things of the world. We profess with our mouths that he is our Saviour and Lord, but we fail to put our trust in him and instead trust in the ways and systems of the world for our security. Through the prophets God condemned his people for their false view of worship. They thought that they could live their lives however they wanted as long as they came to the Temple to offer God the sacrifices he required. Jesus paraphrased God's response to that when he told the people, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." True worship involves our *whole* selves given over to God for his use *all* of the time.

Think about the vow we taken we were baptized. The priest asks us: "Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the empty display and false values of the world, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will not follow them and be

led by them?" The point is that God intends to take us out of the world and give us new life in his Kingdom. In our Baptism each of us was consecrated to God. But what does it mean to be consecrated to something or someone? Notice that in our baptismal vows we don't promise to renounce the world the flesh and the devil when it's convenient or when it doesn't cut into our own plans or our own enjoyment or sense of security. In our vows we give ourselves over to God wholly. We put ourselves firmly in his kingdom and renounce everything that isn't a part of it. Like the Israelites, we've been called by God to a new life. They were slaves to the Egyptians and he brought them to a new life of freedom. We were slaves to sin and he does the same for us spiritually. Look at Romans 6:19-22. St. Paul says:

I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

When it came to conveying the depth of our total devotion first to sin and then as redeemed men and women to Christ, Paul chose to liken it to slavery. A slave is literally owned by his master and is expected to be totally devoted to him in body and soul. For Paul, to serve Christ was everything—it was his life. Remember that a slave's life belonged to his master, and so while the analogy isn't perfect—the negative side of slavery isn't what Paul has in view here—it illustrates the level of devotion that the Christian has to God. He has bought us out of slavery with the blood of his Son, and we serve him; not out of fear or slavish obligation, but out of gratitude for what he has done for us. There's no way we can pay him back for his sacrifice, but we do the best we can and he gives us the Spirit to enable us to do more than we can ever do on our own.

At one time each of us was a slave to sin.

That's a point where all the negative connotations of slavery are appropriate. Oddly enough, though, when we were slaves to sin most of us didn't really see the negative side of it. Read some 19th Century American history and you'll read about slaves that ran away from their masters. They didn't want to live that miserable life. But before we found Christ, how many of us tried to run away from the master of sin? We were slaves to sin and we enjoyed it. Like the drug addict who is a slave to his drugs that get him high, all the time ignoring the harm the drugs do to his body and mind and the life of crime those drugs often lead him to, the sinner is slave to the momentary pleasures of sin, oblivious to or ignoring the deathly consequences of that sin. In our natural and fallen state each of us is a slave to sin. We have absolutely no desire to get away from it and no way to master its temptations if we did want to get away, and so we serve it body and soul.

By contrast, as redeemed men and women we are called to the same level of commitment to God now that we used to have to sin. We used to seek sin out. We left no stone unturned in a search for pleasure. Brothers and sisters, we need to put at least the same amount of effort into serving Christ that we used to put into serving sin. Where our wills were once submitted to unrighteousness, we are now to submit them totally to God's righteousness. That's the total consecration that has its beginning in our baptismal vows.

And note that there's no middle state and there's no compromising. You can't be independent. You can't say you're no longer a slave to sin and at the same time not be a slave to righteousness. Just like a real slave, God bought us from our old master, Sin, with the blood of Jesus, who became our new master. In a very real sense we've gone from one form of slavery to another. It's not uncommon to hear people refer to someone as a "carnal Christian"—someone who professes to have made Christ his Saviour and Lord, but doesn't really live out that faith. St. Paul doesn't leave any room for someone like that. Either you're a slave to sin and serve the world, the flesh, and the devil, or you're a slave to Christ, serving him with body and soul. As we saw last Sunday, St. James makes the point that faith without works is a dead faith. You can't

be a Christian, you can't have experienced the amazing grace of God in your life, and at the same time not be wholly driven to serve Jesus with everything you've got!

Do you ever notice how the unsaved usually don't want to have anything to do with Jesus? I know a lot of people who take a big interest in God, but they don't want to talk about Jesus unless it's their own totally distorted "mushy" Jesus. A distant and non-interfering God is okay, but a personal Saviour who calls us to account makes the world uncomfortable. This is why churches that teach pop-psychology and self-help, that affirm people in their sin or in their spiritual immaturity, and that don't hold their members accountable are so popular. Nobody likes to be convicted of sin. We'd rather have a religion that makes us feel warm and fuzzy and comfortable. St. Paul makes the point that the problem isn't that man doesn't want God—what we don't want, he says, is Christ. We want God and the good things he has to offer on our own terms, but Jesus reminds us that we are sinners and can only come to God on his terms—that we have to give up our sin and make him our Lord. Paul tells us that when we were ruled by sin, we didn't want to have anything to do with Christ—he only convicted us of our sin. Our redemption flips things: now that Christ rules us, he must be our master and we should have no desire for sin.

St. Paul's slavery analogy might not be perfect, but I think it does an excellent job of conveying to us the absoluteness of our duty under Christ. I know that some of your Bible translations render the word as "servant." That misses the point of the absoluteness of what St. Paul is saying. We are to have a total devotion. Our love for our master changes our desire. How much of a chore is it to sin? In our natural state we love to sin. Our desire to serve Christ should be like that. Serving him isn't a chore, it's a pleasure because we love him.

I remember one Sunday morning a year or two ago when the Waite family arrived for church. Abby came in the side door carrying Kingsley. She had her arms wrapped around his chest, his arms flailing around to the sides and his feet banging into her knees as she struggled to carry him. And I remember someone saying, "Wow, Abby! You must be

getting strong, because he sure looks heavy!" And Abby set him down and said, "He's not heavy, he's my brother!" When you love someone, serving that person is a pleasure, not a chore. That's how we're to serve Christ.

If we go on and look at verses 22 to 23, Paul shows us the contrast made between the wages of sin and the wages of Christ:

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:22-23)

Sin has one end and while it might seem fun right now, the only place where sin takes us is to death. We usually think of this in terms of the Final Judgment and sinners being cast into Hell at the end of time. What scares me about that is that hellfire and demons, while they might be scary, don't really express the most important aspect of the death to which sin leads us. God is the source of life and each and every sin we commit widens the gulf that stands between God and us. Each sin takes us further away from the life found only in God. Most people think the really bad thing about Hell is the heat. The worst thing about Hell is the total absence of God's life-giving presence.

In contrast, in return for serving Christ we are daily brought closer and closer to God's life. I think a lot of Christians sit around and passively wait for eternity in heaven. A lot of Christians look at the problems of the world around us and take an escapist attitude. We want out. "Come, Lord Jesus!" And yet too often in just looking for escape, we miss out on the life that God gives us right now. When we're grafted into his vine we start bearing fruit—that's his life manifested in us *right now*. Sin has its own fruit, but it's like a cancer that gradually kills the vine. God, on the other hand, nourishes us and makes us grow. That's the sanctification that St. Paul writes about—it's the journey we take as we travel the road to eternal life, each day getting closer and closer to God.

He also notes that God's gift of eternal life is free. It's free because the life of the Christian isn't the result of his own

goodness—it's in spite of his sinfulness. Every one of us has earned the deathly wages of sin—it only takes one time, one sin. Each of us deserves death, but life in God can never be deserved or earned. It's God's gift. And as we follow our new master we will find his sustaining grace will grow; our yoke will become easier, our burden will become lighter, our peace will become deeper, and our hope will become more and more assured.

Our Gospel lesson gives us the assurance we need as we put on Christ's yoke and carry the burden he's given us. In our lesson today we read St. Mark's account of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes for the crowd that had gathered to hear him preach.

Jesus expects us to follow him just like those people followed him into the country where there was nothing to eat. He didn't cut his sermon short thinking, "Hmm, some of these people came a long way and I'd better let them go early so they can go home to dinner." He preached for three days. But all the time he understood what they'd given up to be there. He said,

I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away. (Mark 8:2-3)

Christ demands our entire devotion, but in return he gives us all the grace we need to follow him. When he calls us to seek him first, he knows what we've left behind to follow him. He knows how far we've traveled to be with him and to sit at his feet. He'll make sure that we are taken care of. The Gospels tell this story more than once, and each time they tell us how everyone ate until he was satisfied and that there were still plenty of leftovers. God isn't stingy with his blessings. These accounts of his generosity ought to confirm our faith in him.

Brothers and sisters, God has promised this all along. Go back to our Old Testament lesson from Hosea. This is what he promises in verses 4-8:

I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned

from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit. (Hosea 14:4-8)

It's easy to be wholly devoted to Christ and to stay away from sin when we're surrounded by our brothers and sisters as we worship God on Sunday morning. But when we step out the church door and into the world it's not always easy to take that little pocket of the Kingdom of God with us. God's promise to us is that he will give us the grace necessary to follow him—and we know from what he's done in the past that he's never stingy with his grace. Too often we foolishly go off into the world and try to "be good" on our own. It doesn't work that way, because without God's life sustaining us we have no life of our own. We make the mistake of focusing on eternal life as a reward we'll get after we die. Life is God's reward to the faithful every day, right here and right now. All we have to do is take our collect for today and make it our daily prayer and our daily commitment:

"Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of your Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and so by your mercy keep us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."