

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: July 2, 2017**

**Proper 8: Romans 6: 12-23:**

*Free At Last, Free At Last, Good God Almighty, I'm Free At Last*

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**In January 1985, a large suitcase was discovered at the customs office of the Los Angeles International Airport. Inside the suitcase was the dead body of an unidentified young woman. U.S. Customs agents who discovered the body immediately launched an investigation. What they uncovered was a tale of a horrible tragedy that resulted from the desperate desire of two young people for freedom. The dead woman was the wife of a young Iranian living in the U.S. Her desire was to join her husband. However she was unable to obtain a visa. So, she took matters into her own hands. She squeezed herself into a large suitcase and had it smuggled onto a jet headed for the United States. It was a foolish endeavor. Even if she had survived the journey in the cargo bay of the jet, she would have remained an illegal alien spending the rest of her life**

looking over her shoulder fearing discovery. And so she died a lonely death squeezed into a tiny space in the cargo hold of an airplane.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, as we prepare to celebrate our nation's birthday this week, it would be good for us to reflect upon what American citizenship has meant to many people over the past 241 years, and what it means to many who seek to enter our land of the free today. People, including many of our own ancestors, have gone to extraordinary lengths to make America their home. What is it about this land that has made it so attractive to the rest of the world? Of course, many people come here looking for work. They are tired of eking out a subsistence living in their own land. They know that this is truly a land of economic opportunity. Most of them come here and work hard and become an asset to their community and to our country. Others live in lands torn with crime or outright oppression by their own government. They come here looking for security.

It's interesting in a very sad way, but few people die in traditional warfare nowadays, that is, war between nations. Most people who die today from violence are killed either in crimes or they are the victims of terrorism or they are victims of violence from their own governments. There are still some very cruel authoritarian governments in many parts of the world. So people come

**to America as they have for 241 years for economic opportunity or to flee crime or persecution in their own countries. Who can blame either group? Particularly if you have a family, you will go to extraordinary lengths to provide them with a better life.**

**But there is another reason people have risked their very lives to come to this land. And it's summed up in one word: Freedom, Blessed freedom, Holy Freedom, God given freedom. That is what America has stood for more than anything else since its founding 241 years ago. It was founded by a group of individuals who had an amazing vision of a better way of structuring government, of the people, for the people and by the people. "Freedom," what a powerful word. What an amazing idea. Freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom to pursue one's dreams, we dare not take these things for granted. And so in two days, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, we will enjoy family picnics, BBQs and parades. Fireworks will celebrate, as generations have before us, the great gift of freedom.**

**For Christians, however, every worship service ought to be a celebration of freedom for the most important freedom available in this world is the freedom that only Christ can bring and that is freedom from sin and death, freedom**

**from fear and failure, freedom from anger and vindictiveness, freedom from false pride and arrogance**

**Perhaps we should begin our worship with fireworks and replace our organ with a brass band. Why? Because nearly 1800 years before our ancestors fought at Valley Forge, someone else died for our freedom. On the cross of Calvary a man named Jesus of Nazareth gave up his life to free us from every scourge that would crush our spirits and bring us down to sub-human activity. "You have been set free . . ." writes St. Paul.**

**My brothers and sister, do you know and truly appreciate what that means? In our reading from Romans, St. Paul uses the image of slavery. Paul lived in a world where slavery was practiced on a widespread basis. One third of the total population of Italy at this time, were slaves. Some people were enslaved because of military conquest. Others were enslaved because they could not pay their debts. But the people he was writing to knew the life of a slave to be a miserable one. Imagine living at the mercy of the whims of a master who, if he chose, could be cruel and vindictive, one who could whip you or banish you or even have you killed.**

**St. Paul himself knew what it was to be bound in chains while languishing in prison. You and I may have difficulty relating to slavery. Probably none of us**

will ever wear chains around our arms and legs. But there are many people in our land who live as if they are bound with chains. I'm thinking of those who have become addicted to drugs or alcohol or cigarettes or pornography or gambling a host of other vices that have preyed on humanity since the dawn of time. A recovering alcoholic will tell you that the first step to overcoming an addiction is to acknowledge that addiction has taken you prisoner. Addiction can be a terrible master. As former football coach Lou Holtz once said, "I have never heard a successful man or woman get up and say, 'I owe my success to drugs and alcohol.' Yet I know of many people that have ruined their lives because of drugs and alcohol."

Psychologist William Glasser wrote a book several years ago titled *Positive Addiction*. In his book, he notes how some people actually improve their lives through developing what he calls addictions to positive endeavors. For example, Glasser believes a person who jogs one mile a day not only strengthens their heart and lungs, but they will increase their self-confidence and imaginative powers as well.

In the Epistle Paul writes to the Romans and to all of us today. Paul is saying we can become addicted to sin, which includes everything that would separate us from the love of God or we can become addicted to God who will help us.

**My sisters and brothers, allow God to increase your sense of well-being. Allow God to give you something wonderful to live for. The best addiction is being bound by chains of love to God. There is no greater freedom in the world than the freedom that God gives us through Jesus Christ. Whether it is freedom from a debilitating habit or freedom to simply be the very best we can be. There is something about being connected to Christ that allows us to experience a richness of life that those without Christ will never experience.**

**Whatever your situation, there is One who longs to take off any chains, even if it is simply the chains of a meaningless and self-centered preoccupation with your own needs. God wants to help you make a new start, a fresh start. He wants to be your Friend and Ally as you seek to live an abundant life, filled to the brim with a joy that surpasses understanding.**

**The real challenge is, to let go and let God take control of your life so you can join your life to the life of Jesus Christ? When you do that, your soul will shout out that glorious chant that we first heard from the soul of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,**

**“Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last.” Amen.**