

Proper 8a: 7/2/17
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In the name of Christ Jesus, in whose service is perfect freedom.

Some things just go together.
 Cookies & ____ [milk].
 Peanut butter & ____ [jelly].
 Cake & ____ [ice cream].

But how about joy . . . and obedience?
 Isn't that an oxymoron, the ultimate mismatch?

Isn't joy about doing what you want
 whereas obedience means following the rules?
 Joy is cookies and milk;
 obedience is ... brussels sprouts?

Joyful obedience, though, is a thing.
 It's a thing – a phrase – we hear every time we celebrate a baptism,
 the most recent not quite a month ago.
 It's when we're gathered around the font
 and I have the privilege of picking up that heavy brass flagon/pitcher of water
 and make a big splash before launching into the prayer
 called Thanksgiving over the Water:
*"We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ
 in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn
 by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into
 his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name
 of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." (Prayer Book, pp. 306-7)*

Did you catch it -- the words "joyful obedience"
 sliding into each other in the waters of baptism?

Much of the theology behind this verbal collision
 comes from our namesake St. Paul in our second lesson,
 the Epistle to the Romans, from which we're reading all summer.
 Today's passages elaborates on Paul's core teaching on baptism
 as being buried with Christ in the waters of baptism and
 raised with him to the newness of life.
 (We literally read that passage last Sunday.)

Paul has experienced this as such a dramatic transformation
 that it changes everything.
 He's died to his old life and been born anew as a servant of Christ.

The only problem is that Paul doesn't use the word "servant"; he uses the word "slave" -- one of the most negative, oppressive, exploitative, downright ugliest words ever. A word that represents one of the most shameful, most sinful, chapters of our nation's history. And a horrific state that continues in parts of the world today, and right here still in the form of human trafficking.

So we have a lot to process in order to hear this word the way Paul intends. We have to admit that the institution of slavery existed in his society. And, without making any excuses for it, realize that it was an entirely different situation than in our context.

More to the point, Paul isn't talking about the institution of slavery, as one human person over another. Paul's describing an existential state, if you will. A spiritual category.

Paul says that the reality is we're all slaves to something, we're all owned by/indebted to something. Whether we know it or not, whether we admit it or not, we're all enslaved to something or someone. I wonder, to what or whom are *you* enslaved?

Look at Paul's life. Before he became a "slave" to Christ, back when he was so zealously persecuting Christians, he acted as if he were "free" to do as he pleased.

But what little we know of Paul's early life suggests that he was an angry, bitter man. What compelled him to act as he did? What enslaved him?

Maybe Paul was a slave to being a workaholic (which many of us know something about).
 Maybe he was a slave to a narrow, bigoted understanding of religion (alive and well today).
 Maybe he was a slave to the feeling that there was something missing from his life, and was desperately trying to fill it up with something, anything (sound familiar?).
 Maybe he was a slave to attention (look around at our celebrity culture).
 Maybe he was a slave to other people's opinions.
 Or maybe . . .

By the grace of God, Paul encountered Christ.
 He died to that old way of life, to whatever had made a slave of him;
 and was raised with Christ to share a new life
 which demanded total obedience
 and yielded perfect joy.

As Paul himself wrote to the early Christians in Rome,
 “Thanks be to God that you, once slaves of sin,
 have become obedient from the heart . . .
 that you, . . . set free from sin
 [have] become slaves of righteousness.”

Sounds like joyful obedience to me.

A while back I heard on NPR an interview with a neuroscientist
 who studies the so-called “pleasure circuit”
 located in the middle front section of our brains.
 He explained how addiction –
 a tragically common form of enslavement –
 is basically doing something more but enjoying it less.
 It creates a kind of *false freedom* that ultimately blunts our pleasure.

By the same token, he described scientific studies which found
 that altruistic behaviors such as prayer, meditation, charitable giving and learning –
 what we might call Christian *disciplines* --
 favorably stimulate our pleasure circuitry.
 This, he said, is the “center of so much that makes us human.”

Makes sense, doesn't it?
 After all, we are created in the image of God
 who sent Jesus Christ to live and die as one of us.
 Naturally, doing things,
 practicing disciplines,
 that bring us closer to God in Christ would bring us pleasure.
 Such *obedience* would bring us *joy*.

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