

From Slavery to Freedom

Clergy Column, *The Centre Daily Times*, July 18, 2015

by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

“My fellow Americans, we are not free. We never have been, and we never will be.”

How would our society react to hearing those words coming from a presidential candidate?

For the candidate in question, it would be an act of political suicide. For those junior staffers unfortunate enough to have worked for his or her campaign, it would be the frustrating end to an ambition (and a scramble for new employment). For the media, it would be a happy circus – a welcome blip of real content in the otherwise monotonous stream of poll-tested platitudes. But for the rest of us, it would simply be puzzling. What aspiring leader would dare to tell us that we are not free?

It’s tremendously surprising, then, to note that the greatest leader of the early Christian movement said this very thing. Writing to what was then a fledgling church in the city of Rome about the middle of the first century, the Apostle Paul penned these words: “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Romans, chapter 6, verse 16).

Imagine the response of Paul’s readers. How dare this ‘apostle’ tell them, citizens of the greatest empire in the known world, that they were not free? How dare this upstart rabbi from the provinces compare the urbane people of Rome with denizens of the lowest social class? Even Paul’s supporters may have cringed. Was their friend out of his mind?

Yet Paul was simply echoing Jesus Christ. Some twenty years before Paul wrote, Jesus had said to a crowd in Jerusalem, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Those who heard him resented the implication that they were somehow not free, and said so: “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus’ response was unapologetic: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” (John, chapter 8, verses 31-36).

It’s ironic, isn’t it? Words that would end a road to the White House lie at the heart of the greatest religious movement the world has ever seen. A statement that would shrivel a political career continues to swell the Christian church throughout the world to this day.

Perhaps you think it’s all just nonsense. But isn’t it at least curious? We are all well-acquainted with political imbeciles. But are any of us really willing to say that the Apostle Paul had less brains than the average politician? Would we say that about Jesus Christ?

If not, then we are left in a very curious position indeed. Two of the most influential people who have ever walked this earth tell us that there is a sense in which we are all slaves. Both said that there is one way – and only one way – to become truly free.

None of us would vote for it. Most of us hate the idea to the very fiber of our being. But what if they were actually right? Isn’t the possibility at least worth investigating?

Jeremiah Montgomery is pastor of Resurrection Orthodox Presbyterian Church in State College. Visit Resurrection online at resurrectionopc.org. He quotes the English Standard Version of the Bible.