

A Declaration of God-Dependence

Preached FCCW July 5, 2020 Virtual Service

Romans 7:15-25a

We Americans pride ourselves on, and jealously guard, our independence. Yesterday we held our annual star-spangled celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Also, recently, some people chose to assert their independence in a less desirable manner by disregarding social distancing guidelines and wearing protective masks during the pandemic. Independence is a worthy thing to celebrate. But independence can also create illusions of self-sufficiency. It can make us forget that there are some things that we cannot do as well, or do at all, without help. That *dependence* is not always a bad thing.

In the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul speaks from personal experience when he describes the importance of recognizing our own limits and our dependence upon God. He speaks from personal experience when he says: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can WILL what is right, but I cannot DO it. For I do not do the GOOD I WANT, but the EVIL I DO NOT WANT is what I do."

Can anyone relate to what Paul is describing? I sure can. There are times when my actions don't always reflect the person I want to be. Do you ever feel like your intentions and your actions aren't always in harmony? Maybe you've struggled with some addiction or some compulsive behavior that has a hold on you. Maybe you notice a pattern in your life of making poor choices in relationships. Or, you recognize an inability to control certain emotions, like anger, anxiety, or judging other people. Most of us have encountered something that exerts a control over some area of our lives that willpower alone cannot dethrone.

Paul had been a Pharisee, which means that he looked to strict obedience to the Commandments as the means for controlling the rebellious parts of himself, and conforming to God's will for his life. Ultimately, he discovered that doing this on his own strength and willpower was an exercise in futility. We too, look to the Bible to guide us in knowing what a life lived according to God's will looks like. But I have to confess, that like Paul, I find that there is much, much more in the Bible that describes the person I WOULD LIKE TO BE, then there is that describes WHO I ACTUALLY am capable of being on my own. I'd like to believe that I can face whatever life throws my way with a faith like David had when he stood up to Goliath. But it doesn't always turn out that way. I may make it my goal to follow Jesus' example of forgiving people. But in reality, find it hard to let go of grudges I hold over even silly little offenses.

Let's face it, the stuff Jesus tells us to do, don't come easily or naturally. Turn the other cheek? Do not judge others? Give your possessions to the poor? I can recognize those as being noble ideals. I can sincerely desire to do those things. On a good day, I might even muster the will to do them. But then something breaks down between the willing and the doing. As the Roman poet Ovid put it, "I see the right and I approve it, too. Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue."

On a daily basis we all fall short not only of being who God calls us to be, but also of our own best intention to be the person we'd like to be. The Apostle Paul says that it is like there is a tyranny within each of us, that gets the best of us and sabotages the expression of our truest selves. Something that keeps us from being truly free to be the person we wish we could be. Which led him to ask the question that anyone who has shared this kind of personal awareness has asked themselves: "Wretched man (or woman) that I am, who will rescue me?" And then he answered that question for himself, and for all of us who have shared that same frustration. He said, "Thanks be to God, through Christ Jesus."

The solution to self-defeating cycles of behavior that willpower alone cannot change is found only in Jesus' intervention in our lives. To anyone who is familiar with 12 Step recovery programs this will all sound familiar. Whether the thing that defeats you is alcohol, drugs, gambling, or co-dependent relationships; whether it is a deep-seated lack of self-esteem, or a rigid perfectionism, the path to independence follows the same route. It always starts with an acknowledgement of your powerlessness to make the change you are hoping for on your own willpower and strength. Then it leads to reaching out to God's power to win the victory you are unable to achieve on your own.

Is there an area of your life where you have experienced continued struggle - maybe even failure? The truth is that we will struggle with many of our issues til our dying day. Those struggles confront us with the limits of our own resources for changing our lives. So time after time, we are invited to return to this table.

Not to deny our weaknesses, but to confess our failures.

Not to demand perfection from ourselves, but to accept the Grace that Jesus offers.

Here, we are reminded again of God's forgiveness.

We receive the reinforcement of the Spirit's power, supporting us in the midst of our struggles.

Because this Table commemorates the decisive battle in the victory Jesus won for us all.

Jesus promises us rest from the burden of struggling to change our lives on our own.

But Jesus is no tyrant.

So he waits for us to accept his invitation to invite him into our lives.

In other words, he grants us the freedom to choose whether to struggle on our own, or to let him share our burdens.

A wise man named Irenaeus once said, "The glory of God is the human being that is fully alive."

To be fully alive means being completely liberated from tyrannies from without and from within.

There are many forms of oppression that can diminish our freedom.

Some of them are outside of ourselves.

Against *those* kinds of threats to our freedom words such as those found in the Declaration of Independence can be our inspiration.

But, against the forms of oppression that are *inside* us, what we need most is not a declaration of our own independence.

But a Declaration of our *God* Dependence.