

# “Becoming Free” by David Lloyd



July 5, 2020

## Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Here is the first part of today's verses from Paul's epistle to the church in Rome as paraphrased in *The Message* [\[1\]](#):

*7<sup>15-16</sup> What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So, if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.*

*17-20 But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I*

*realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.*

*<sup>21-23</sup>It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.*

That describes me pretty well. If you're honest, doesn't that describe you too? And all our human institutions: families, friends, and neighbors; our churches and schools, our businesses, banks, and hospitals; our governments at all levels? Something has gone wrong deep within us and gets the better of us **every time**.

In other translations Paul describes himself variously as a prisoner of sin and as a slave to sin. We don't have to explore whether we are born into sin or whether we choose to sin or whether it somehow just comes upon us – it is enough to recognize that sin has us bound in chains that we cannot seem to break on our own. There are numerous chains binding me: love of money, sloth, pride, hypocrisy, anger, lust, sexism, and racism. What are yours?

Let me dare to name two sins that have permeated our country from the beginning: racism and greed. Our country was structured on the love of money and racism. The importation of slavery was the goose laying golden eggs for the whole economy. The wealth of plantation owners came from exporting tobacco, indigo and cotton produced by enslaved Americans, but so did the wealth of banks, railroads, textile mills, shipyards, and shipping companies in the mid-Atlantic states and New England. Slavery ended, but the ongoing racism

embedded in our economy benefitted our white ancestors, directly or indirectly. Our country is still **structured** on greed and racism. We are still bound by these chains of sin.

Yesterday we celebrated the approval and printing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. This Wednesday, July 8, commemorates the day that the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia rang. I'm linked to the Liberty Bell. When patriots learned that the British attempted to seize it, they spirited it to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. On the way it was hidden overnight in a house on the edge of Quakertown, where I was born. (My mother pointed out this historical anecdote on every trip to see my grandparents!) The Liberty Bell is inscribed with a verse from [Leviticus 25:10](#), "Proclaim LIBERTY Throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants Thereof." We U.S. citizens, including our newest citizen, Jackie Mbabazi, are both inspired by and threatened by those words, and the sad truth is that our nation has **never** made that proclamation. We have proclaimed liberty to only **some** of the inhabitants, but not those enslaved or those without proper documentation, or the Dreamers. Our failure to do so is one obvious national sin. Another obvious sin is that a lot of people in our nation **don't really want** to proclaim liberty to all the inhabitants. The much bigger sin is that we deny that an even larger number of us don't want to do help with liberation. It's too hard. It will take too long. We have other plans for our lives.

In 1954 my family moved from Pennsylvania to Georgetown, Delaware, which was segregated both by law and by custom. I remember the blatantly inferior elementary school for black children and the "Whites" and "Colored" signs at the restrooms and drinking fountains in the courthouse. Across the street from our home was a small restaurant with a prominent sign in the front window, "Seats for whites only." In school, only fifty miles from where Frederick Douglass was born and from where Harriet Tubman fled slavery, I learned only white American history because the stories of black American history

had been suppressed. I lived into that sin of racism. To my shame, I know that I used the n-word once in a horribly misguided attempt to fit in with my peers' racist views, even though doing that went against everything that my parents taught me by word and deed.

As a teenager I felt the urge to join in the movement for racial justice. I began taking teeny tiny little steps to do so and I remember feeling ostracized by classmates. I had the naïve belief that I could escape racism when I left my town for college. I assumed we could and would nonviolently change to a racially integrated and just society. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became a personal hero, especially because we shared the same birthday. His assassination and the ensuing riots in 1968 shook my faith in the goodness of my country. Upon graduation I left for the Peace Corps, choosing to be in Africa, and I loved the people and cultures there, but I was still largely ignorant of my own racism. During my military service at the Army Exhibit Unit in Alexandria I was assigned to develop an exhibit on the contributions of black soldiers. While looking through old prints and sepia-toned photos in the National Archives I discovered an American history I never knew. I loved it! Creating that display was another small step on my journey as a racist in recovery. My hope in my country was rekindled, and then I read the 1970 novel *Time and Again*, in which the main character silently reflects, "We had a chance to do justice to our Negroes, and when they asked it, we refused...This is a time when it becomes harder and harder to continue telling yourself that we are still good people." [\[iii\]](#)

Those lines were written fifty years ago. I am haunted by those lines because I know I want to be "good people" but am still chained by the sin of my racism. Recently I've been taking more steps towards racial justice, tiny as they may be, using my gift of teaching to broaden our knowledge of American history. In a normal year, without a pandemic virus, I spend the spring guiding busloads of eighth graders to historic

monuments and memorials throughout the DC region. At Mount Vernon and at Arlington Cemetery I ask them for another term for "plantation." They always say "farm" and I reply that on a farm you pay your workers, that our plantations were forced labor camps, somewhat like what the Nazis and communist dictatorships had. Each time the teachers, chaperones, and students squirm at how we have allowed our history to deny or downplay our racism. I squirm right along with them.

I visit Lafayette Square several times a week on my tours. I tell my groups that the White House, like the Capitol and the Washington Monument, was built in large part with enslaved labor, and that eight presidents brought enslaved people with them to live there. I stand at the Jefferson Memorial, pointing out his words in the Declaration of Independence that we all know. Last year I also began mentioning Sally Hemings, the enslaved woman who bore him six children and was half-sister to his deceased wife Martha. At the National Archives building, I point out that at one time this block had a pen that held enslaved people. At the Lincoln Memorial I urge them to read the words of his second inaugural address, where he clarifies that the primary cause of the Civil War was slavery, because history books in many southern schools deny that. At the memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King the last thing I point out on our way to our bus are his words carved into the wall, "We shall overcome, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." Then I usually say nothing because I am near tears as I wonder if his hope will come true in my remaining years. I wish we could ring the Liberty Bell without hypocrisy. I wish we knew how it would feel to be free of our racism.

I still have so much work to do, to see and fully confess my racism, to figure out what atonement would be appropriate, and how I can change the areas of my life where I am complicit in **systemic** racism. I am not at all confident that I can will myself to do these. The chains of my racism are strong. I wish

I knew how it would feel to be free of my racism. I wish the Liberty Bell could ring for me.

Back to Paul's letter to the Roman Christians in *The Message*:

*7<sup>24</sup>I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?*

*The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. Christ acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where we want to serve God with all our heart and mind but are pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.*

With Jesus' death and resurrection the chains of sin have been broken. I have been freed from sin; you have been freed from sin. That is the good news. In a few moments we can take the bread and cup of salvation, symbols of God's love for us through Christ. As Paul says later in the same letter, again in *The Message*:

*8:<sup>35-39</sup>Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture:*

*They kill us in cold blood because they hate you.*

*We're sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one.*

*None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely **nothing** can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.*

The bread we are about to eat and cup we are about to drink give us comfort. Yes, they make us feel good about ourselves and appreciate God's creation. And that is good, and it is important. But the original meaning of the word "comfort" in Latin means "with strength," "to strengthen." The primary purpose of eating the bread and drinking the symbolic blood of Christ's body is to get the spiritual nourishment we need to be strong enough to do the right thing, to do all the right things that we can't do, that we can do but don't do, and to do them with

the defiant hope that God is still writing the story and that despite darkness a light shines and that God can redeem our crap and that beauty matters and that despite every disappointing thing we have ever done or that we have ever endured, that there is no hell from which resurrection is impossible. [\[iiii\]](#)

With God's love for us through Christ's death and resurrection, the comfort that strengthens us and gives us defiant hope, I can dare to join in the movement of liberation for everyone everyone, using the gifts God has given me in addition to teaching. You can dare to join in the movement for liberation, using the gifts God has given you: writing, speaking, political organizing, prayer, banking, legal drafting, music – whatever your gifts are. In the process of uniting to liberate others we become liberated ourselves from racism and from all the other sins that bind us. We can dare to ring the Liberty Bell and proclaim liberty throughout the land to **all** its inhabitants. We can dare to shout that God's love has set us free at last, free at last, from the chains of our personal and national sins. Thank God Almighty, with God's love we will see how it feels to be free.

May it be so. Amen.

[i] The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, ©2002, Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress.

[ii] © Jack Finney, 1970. New York: Simon & Shuster, p. 378-9

[iii] Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Sermon on Why Hope and Vapid Optimism Are Not The Same Thing," May 28, 2013 at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2013/05/sermon-on-why-hope-and-vapid-optimism-are-not-the-same-thing/>