

**Let Freedom Ring**  
**July 4, 2010**  
Romans 8.1-2; 11-  
The Reverend Tom Cramer

I.

Tonight, about 300 of my brother's closest family and friends will gather in his back yard to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. There will be plenty of food and drink for everybody, and to be honest, it is one of my favorite holidays of the year.

My brother's house has a beautiful view of the San Diego bay, and from his backyard we can see three firework shows. Because he is in the food and beverage industry, many of his friends will try top each other with their best recipes, a competition which I personally love to judge.

But by far, the highlight of the evening, much better than any of the gourmet food and special beverages, comes exactly at 7:30 PM when my brother steps out onto his balcony and reads the Declaration of Independence in it's entirety. It may sound overly dramatic, but everyone will be absolutely still during this reading and many of us will cry because of the values it represents.

We stand there at that moment, rich and poor, black and white, and every color in between, from many cultures of the world and listen to a declaration of freedom.

On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress of the thirteen American colonies, then at war with Great Britain, declared that henceforth they would stand as independent states, and thus no longer a part of the British Empire.

If you haven't read this declaration in a while, I urge you to do so. Not only will it make you proud to be an American, it will explain to you in no uncertain terms why Congress voted to declare independence from Great Britain and the tyranny of King George III.

Let me read just one paragraph of this great document:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. . . . That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right

of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.

And then it goes on to list 27 abuses of power by King George III and his government and spells out exactly why the thirteen Colonies were willing to risk everything for their freedom.

Romans 8 is Paul's declaration of independence not from a tyrannical king, but from the powers that are in rebellion against God in the world. Hear now the Word of God as I read from Romans 8: 1 & 2 and 11-17. [Read and then pray.]

## II.

If Romans 8 is Paul's declaration of independence from the forces that wage war against God, Romans 7 is a description of the bondage to which humanity is enslaved. In verse 14 and following he writes this:

<sup>14</sup>For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. <sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . <sup>18</sup>For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Paul is describing the human condition here *without* Christ as Lord, that left to our own devices we have no defense against sin. Finally, he cries out in verse 24 of chapter 7:

<sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

And then he gives the answer:

<sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

## III.

Paul knew the law of God—he was a rabbi among rabbis—but he also realized that there was another force working within him that predisposed him to sin, and for that, he cried out for a Savior.

The law of God was of no help to him. In fact, it only increased his anxiety over his sin, because it merely showed him how far he had fallen short.

I've heard it said that the law is like a mirror. It shows us when our face is dirty but it has no power to wash our face and make it clean. Paul needed a Savior to break the tyranny of sin over his life and he found one in Jesus Christ.

#### IV.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul uses the language of the court system to convey God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

He begins his declaration of independence in Chapter 8 by saying, "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Someone who is condemned is on his way to the gallows. He's on death row and he knows he has broken the law and deserves to die. A condemned man knows that his life is going to end in execution, society knows it, and everybody knows it.

According to Paul's letter to the Romans, however, the whole human race is on death row, justly condemned for its rebellion against God's holy laws. But God does something in the fullness of time, in the fullness of Israel's history—in the story of Abraham's family that is "blessed to be a blessing"—God does something in Jesus Christ that surprises everyone. Humanity is on the way to the gallows and God declares us NOT GUILTY because he sends his Son to pay the penalty on our behalf.

In turn for our rebellion, God gives us his faithfulness. In turn for our brokenness, God gives us his perfection. And instead of condemnation and death, God gives us everlasting life. Jesus is God's declaration of our independence for those would put our faith in him.

#### V.

If you were here last Sunday, you heard Michael Wenning preach on that strange encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. Instead of going around Samaria, which is what most devout Jews would do at the time, Jesus and his disciples decide to pass right through it.

While he was there, he met a woman who had been married five times and the man she was currently living with was not her husband. That may not seem so strange to those of us who grow up in the age of Hollywood, but for a woman of her day, that would have been tremendously shameful.

Some scholars even believe that the reason she was there in the heat of the day was so she could avoid the public humiliation she would have received from going to draw water in the early morning or late afternoon.

Nevertheless, Jesus spends time with her, not in some secret way, but right out in the open where everyone could see them. She keeps trying to steer the conversation away from her personal life, but eventually, she realizes that Jesus cares about her and has the power to forgive her sins.

She was stuck in her past, sullied and broken, but Jesus points her to a promised future that he was only then beginning to reveal. One of my favorite parts about that encounter is that he removes the woman's shame. We know this because of how that encounter ends. She goes running off to tell all the people in her town about Jesus.

#### VI.

In Paul's declaration of independence, he declares the past has no hold over us. If we trust in Jesus Christ, the spirit of rebellion that once lived in all of us, or what Paul calls "the flesh," is overcome by the Spirit of God that now has taken its place. The new Spirit that replaces the old one is none other than God's Spirit alive in us. We live by the new Spirit, not the under tyranny of the old domination. That's why Paul can declare, "we are not debtors to the flesh." We don't owe the old self anything.

#### VII.

In 1980, the small church in which I grew up decided to sponsor a refugee family from Laos. They were called the Soothivong family, and although our church was small, their family was not. Kichong and Poo Soothivong had 9 children! So when their family fled from the communist regime in Laos, it was a huge undertaking. Just finding a place where all of them could live under one roof was a big deal, but we all pitched in and made sure that they had the best start they could have in the United States.

But one thing I noticed. After escaping through the jungles of Laos and crossing the Mekong River with the communist hunting them every step of the way, they didn't feel like they owed the Laotian government anything when they arrived here. In the same way, Paul says, we are set free from the law of sin and death, and what he calls "the flesh," and we don't owe the old life anything.

As an aside, I think it's rather ironic in a good way that the oldest child of that family has the highest security clearance granted by the U.S. Government because of the type of work she performs. Paul is making the point that when you trust yourself to Jesus Christ, you don't only get a

passport to the country of your new family, you get top security clearance in the ways of God!

#### VIII.

That's the first thing I want you to get from this message, that you can decide right now to leave your past behind with its tyranny of self-rule and rebellion, which leads to death, and you can you can pledge your allegiance right now to the Lord and giver of life.

You don't owe the old life anything. In Christ, the old ways are condemned whether you let them go or not. Selfishness, greed, pride, envy, bitterness, prejudice, hatred, and all that stuff may be hanging around for a while, but in the large scheme of things, only God's love and truth will last forever.

So if you're ready to burn up your old passport and get a new one, Christ is ready for you. But to get the new one, you have to declare your independence from old state you were in. That's what repentance is all about. Turning from the old ways and grabbing hold of God's ways.

#### IX.

It's interesting to study the history of immigration in this country. I'm always amazed at the gratitude and work ethic of the latest wave of immigrants. Those of us who have been here for generations can sometimes become complacent about how different our country is. It's easy to forget that by virtue of our principles, values, and laws, this country is like no other on the face of the earth. Whenever I come home from overseas, I am tempted to kiss the ground once I land on American soil, and have even done so on a few occasions, I'm so grateful to be home.

#### X.

If you take a cab in New York City, you're likely to meet a first-generation immigrant. Some of them barely speak English, but they are out there trying. They are working two and three jobs to make a living for their families and when you talk to them, you realize how grateful they are to be in America. Just look at the enrollment our most prestigious universities, students from all over the world are at the top of the class.

When I meet first-generation immigrants, I dream of my great grandfather who immigrated from Prussia Germany to escape being drafted by the Prussia army. He borrowed his friend's passport to get to the United States. That was back in the day when they didn't have photographs on them. From there, he built the Cramer Baking Company with the help of his three sons. I think of how one of his sons grew up to be a highly esteemed brain surgeon on the East Coast.

I also think of my great grandmother who immigrated from Ireland and became a house-cleaner for Thomas Sefton, the president of San Diego Trust and Savings Bank. Her daughter, who was my grandmother, worked so hard in school, and was so loved by Mr. Sefton, that he helped her become one of the first women to graduate from Stanford University. Think of it, a daughter of a house cleaner?

And I think of Vivian Soothevong, the daughter of one of nine children that my church sponsored growing up when they fled communist persecution in Laos. She just graduated from high school with a 4.5 grade point average.

#### XI.

These people aren't only free FROM something, they are free FOR something. They declared their independence from past lives of poverty and persecution and dislocation NOT to sit around and talk about freedom, or to keep other immigrants out, but to do something for the world to make it a better place.

The sad fact is that you can live in America and still not be free. You can live in America and still be treated like a second-class citizen. You can live in America and still not be paid a living wage. But there's something even worse, you can live in America and resign yourself to the bondage that other people define for you rather than making America the place that it was meant to be.

#### XII.

In the same way, Paul challenges those who have come to Christ and who have claimed a new future in Christ NEVER to fall back into what he calls a "spirit of slavery." Anyone who is in Christ is not like a slave in a household, they are like an orphan who has been adopted by a loving and kind Father.

Yes, you may have a past, and yes the world may not yet be transformed into the place it will one day be when God's redemption is complete, but your struggle against injustice and oppression and racism and all the other evils of this world is a sign of your adoption into the family of God, not your alienation from it.

Having God's Spirit dwell within you and being adopted into his family means that there is no demand that will be placed on your life that is not also a demand on the God who dwells within you!

Your status has been changed from a rebellious enemy of God to a beloved child of God, and Paul says that proof of this is that you will suffer over the things that break God's heart.

### XIII.

This message was not lost on that great American and preacher Martin Luther King, Jr. His words are so powerful to me because they express not only the freedom upon which this country is built, but the faith to use that freedom to the glory of God. Let me close today by reading an excerpt from one of the greatest speeches ever made. And as I read it, consider the declarations that you need to make to yourself today.

Have you discovered the freedom that Christ intends for you? Are you able to declare with Paul that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and mean it for yourself? And lastly, what are you going to do with the freedom you've been given? Are you going to settle for "good enough" or are you going to go all out to establish God's new dominion, his kingdom of justice and righteousness, on the earth.

Hear these words from Martin Luther Jr as we close today:

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. And some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." . . .

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

*My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.  
Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,  
From every mountainside, let freedom ring!*

Amen.