

Okay, let's begin with the pitfalls that were laid in the way of this Sunday. I'll explain mine now, Michael can decide how much to share when he's suitable to be around people again. To begin with, we moved this week. It went abysmally until Pete showed up with his box truck Wednesday, and Corey showed up with two teenage boys and their subsequent energy. Thank God for their charity and their help. Amanda showed up Thursday to help clean and John showed up Friday to help move stuff, and God blessed us to the extreme with this church's heart. Regardless of the help, however, we were buried this week. Michael, bless him, said I was only responsible for the children's sermon, and that one came easy earlier in the week, so I thought it was going to be simple, jobwise, for me in the midst of the move. HA!

Next pitfall? I don't like Paul. I tend to view texts that were authored by him as being chauvinistic and, I don't know, too patriarchal and high handed maybe? He gets on my nerves. When I read this week's text, right back at the beginning of the week, I was offended and determined not to like whatever was going to be said unless it was outright denouncing Paul. Finally, it's the Fourth of July. I have no issue with patriotism, and I especially like the food, family, and fireworks part of the day, but I do not like the way nationalism has gripped this country. I do not like the church taking too much a part of the celebrations. Historically and currently, when the church aligns itself with the state, people get hurt. We get hungry for the power and money the state offers, and people end up dead and destitute. I hate it when churches hang US flags in the sanctuary. I don't like singing patriotic hymns. And I know we're singing My Country Tis of Thee today, so I maybe shouldn't say that, but I'm too much a student of history to feel wholly comfortable with it. I can't. So, the Fourth of July makes me uneasy.

It's funny though, how God shows up and shows us that what we consider pitfalls are really just opportunities. I know I sound more than a bit like an inspirational coach there, but it's annoyingly true, despite it being made into an aphorism.

Isaac and I were on the way home from Sterling on Friday. My parents had taken the kids to give us the space needed to get done what we needed to get done. We got to talking about the Fourth and Isaac said to me, "No one is ever really free though. Huh. No one is ever really free. That got me thinking. Because we are. In Christ, we are free in a way that we aren't without him. Because the state killed Christ. The powers that be beat him, put him on a cross, stripped him of clothes and dignity, or so they thought, killed him and ended his existence, or so they thought, and everything they attempted to do to him meant absolutely nothing. He wasn't there's to do anything with. No strike of the whip, no sword in the side, nothing. It meant nothing. The state that wanted to be God and demanded complete obedience unto death could do NOTHING. He came back. And he told us that he would bring us with him. That we were his. "My yoke is light and my burden is easy, so be mine!" Is what God tells us.

In Matthew 22:15-22, the state tries to catch Jesus by asking about paying taxes. They think they're being clever. But Jesus asks to see the coin. Caesar's face is on it. And Jesus says, this is Caesar's. Give it to him. Give to him what is his and give to God what is God's. Maybe this doesn't seem so revolutionary, but Caesar declared himself God. Jews had special dispensation, but Christians wouldn't get that same consideration. Jesus says, this earthly stuff, this money, sure, give him that. But everything else in creation, all the important stuff, it's God's.

So a state that tries now to tell us that our bodies aren't our own, that they belong to the government, now means nothing, because they don't own us.

A state that tries to tell people that who they love is wrong, that it's sinful and evil, that state means nothing. God knows whom you love, and God blesses your union of hearts and therefore what the state says is null and void.

A state that tries to tell you that the color of your skin means you're a second class citizen. But this state has no authority over you. This state doesn't know that God made you and blesses you and cherishes you and therefore whatever they think has no power over you. The state has no power. Not really.

A state that tries to determine our worth and tell us who we are has no power. They don't matter. In the end, all they are is dust and all we are belongs to God

Okay, so back to Paul. Oh Paul. I don't want to like you. I didn't want to be cool with what you wrote. But then I called my dad. Who has time for exegeses when you have two days to write a sermon, begin unpacking, and try and regain your sanity before you have to be suitable for other people? That's what I keep my dad around for.

He told me to read Revelations 13. I'm going to share that now.

What do we think this is about? Let's do some exegeses here, together. What do you all think it means?

Okay, covered that. So, what is Paul saying? Does Paul like Nero? Does he see Nero as some saw Trump? A servant of God sent to do God's bidding? Not likely. Nero, after Rome burnt, put Christians on stakes in his garden and set them alight to light his garden parties. I can't imagine

being fond of a guy like that. A guy riddled with syphilis and so egomaniacal that he was willing to kill anyone, or rather have them killed, and consider himself justified. Remind you of anyone?

And, at the end of the day, Paul was executed by the state. He can't have been too obedient then, or not obedient the way the state defined it.

And with that in mind, do Paul's words mean we should be obedient? Do they mean we should hand over authority to tell us what to do with our bodies, whom we should love, or what our worth means? No! We are not theirs! We do not belong to an authoritarian state now, nor will we ever. We are worth more and we belong to one who will never shame us, or deny us, or leave us to die alone and in pain. Their judgement means far more than the state could ever hope. Their power is far greater than a state could ever claim. In Christ we are free! And that freedom means more than any Independence day celebration could ever hope to mean!

And we can love our country too. I have to be clear here, now that I'm nearing the end. I cannot and would not tell you to love your country. We live here. It's our home. We are allowed to love our home. But never love it blindly. Never love it nationalistically. Never align it with God and think God is the power behind the state that blesses it and gives it authority. Like the beasts in Revelation, God gives this state power for now. It can do what it will for now. We can work and strive to be a better nation, but we are not now, nor have we ever been God's nation. This country is made up of earthly powers, and like Caesar's coins, all earthly powers will eventually go back to the earth. Us? We're going to God. And that's what we should be celebrating. Tomorrow and every day. We are free, because we are Theirs. Tomorrow and every day. Amen.