

## **“Liberty and/or Death”**

“Roman Holiday” Series

Romans 12:1-11; Romans 6:12-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to the Spirit’s preparation, as we are called into service. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

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It is probably debatable whether it’s a good idea to commit to a four-week sermon series that aims to be a light-hearted romp through a major section of one of the most theologically dense books of the Bible in the few moments you have to plan your preaching during a week when you’re distracted by your husband being in the hospital. Actually, now that I’ve put it that way, it’s probably not debatable; it’s probably an act of reckless homiletics. But here we are, so we might as well have fun. Let me begin by explaining how we got here. I was looking over the lectionary passages for July, because I was wanting to do something that would hold together over the next few weeks. And there’s all this great stuff in the Romans passages that are scheduled for July. And yet, there’s also so much intense and not particularly helpful theology that has arisen out of this book. So I thought, why not work our way through these chapters, mining them for the good news of grace and liberation they actually offer? But then my mind skipped from grace and liberation to the way summer vacation makes you feel, and the title of one of my favorite movies came to mind; what if we called the series “Roman Holiday”? You know, because it’s about Romans, and it’s aimed at helping us feel free and refreshed?

The confession I am making here is that this series is not about the movie, much as I might like for it to be. But before we dive into the scripture passages, I will share a few points about the movie that can helpfully frame our considerations. First of all, for those of you who haven't seen it, "Roman Holiday" stars Audrey Hepburn as a princess from a hilariously generic European country, who's on a state visit to Rome, and Gregory Peck as an American reporter who's assigned to cover her visit. She escapes the embassy on her first night in town, and the two spend the next day doing "just whatever I like," as she puts it. So in other words, the movie focuses on a contrast between a life that is strictly contained and choreographed and a brief escape into what feels like glorious freedom. That contrast isn't unrelated to the themes we'll be exploring over the next four weeks.

The second thing I want to say about this movie is that it's one of my favorite movies of all time, but I didn't see it until 50 years after it came out. And I think that makes a difference in the way it lands. This is just a taste of how important it is for us to remember how far removed we are today in 2023 from Paul's context in writing to the church in Rome around 55 CE.

Thirdly – and I will be careful here to avoid spoilers – the first time I watched this movie, I loved, loved, loved it, and then it ended all wrong. I was sure I knew what was coming, but the moment of redemption I was longing for didn't arrive. It was terrible. And yet, the movie is so lovely, so charming, so FUN, that I've simply had to hold my perfect ending in my heart and know that it's there even if it's not on film. This is not a

particularly direct analogy to how we can relate to the Bible, but I think it offers us something. As we move through Romans together, I hope we will hold it lightly. It goes back to that 50 years that had passed since the real ending of “Roman Holiday” was written. The ending I wanted may not have been visible in 1953. In a similar way, some of the concerns we may have with the lessons or the language of Paul’s letters may not have existed in 55 CE. Some of the things we’ve learned, even just in the last 30 years are things Paul couldn’t have dreamed of. Just as Paul’s understanding of the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection was shaped by his experience of the world as he lived in it, ours must be shaped by our experiences and the world as we live in it today.

We can hold scripture lightly and still love it and take it seriously. Our reading of the Bible can be a conversation, rather a supposedly context-free receiving of This Is How It Is. As the world of improvisational theater teaches, we can approach Romans with an attitude of “yes, and...” rather than “Yes, Sir!” I still love “Roman Holiday,” and I still think it’s a better movie with my imaginary ending. We can work our way through Romans and arrive at different conclusions than people have before. The conversation and its impact on how we live is what matters.

So that’s all I’m going to say about the movie for now, except that if you haven’t seen it, or if you’d like to see it again, let me know, and maybe we will schedule a viewing sometime this month. And once we’ve watched it, I can tell you how it really should end.

We are, in fact, going to get to “liberty and/or death” in a moment, but before we do, there are two things we need to clarify about Romans in general. First of all, there is a reason Romans has had such an impact. It is likely the most consequential book of the New Testament outside the gospels, and in terms of traditional church doctrine, it may surpass the gospels. It is Paul’s longest letter and densest. But despite generations of theologians’ attempts to turn it into a systematic theology tome, it is really more like a symphony. There are clear themes, which he picks apart and expounds on and connects and comes back to from other angles. It is theological, and indeed, less personal than some of Paul’s letters, being written as it was to a community he hadn’t met in person. So the conversation we will have with it this month is in no way claiming to be comprehensive. We cannot possibly cover it all or even argue with all of the material we’re going to cover. Our aim, in these four weeks, is to find the good news that connects with our current situation. The specifics of whether and what kind of meat to eat change over the centuries, but the message of grace and liberation is timeless.

Secondly, there is something we need to be very careful about. Paul uses a lot of contrasts in his writings. These are often called binaries or dichotomies. I would argue that he doesn’t intend them as nearly such “either/or” alternatives as the church has traditionally made them out to be. But one of the most problematic is the way Paul refers to the “law.” Because too often, when 21<sup>st</sup> century Protestants hear the word “law,” we automatically think “Old Testament,” which means we’re thinking of the Judaism that Paul left behind. Except that he didn’t leave it behind. And our simplistic

assumptions about this do damage. The book of Romans has been used far too much to justify Christian antisemitism and its only slightly less violent cousin supersessionism, the idea that Christianity has replaced Judaism. Indeed, I think one could make the argument that Paul was, in fact, arguing for exactly that. That does not mean we have to. God has continued acting in history since the time of Paul, and as our related traditions have lived side-by-side – tragically often in violent conflict – the Spirit has led good-hearted people of both traditions to new understandings of respect and appreciation for one another. The appropriate posture for Christians when handling our scriptures that have historically been abused for the purposes of denigrating Jewish people and practice is one of humility and penitence. We must listen to our Jewish siblings when they tell us of the harm that our tradition has done. We must look at our scriptures with new eyes, no longer accepting Paul’s antipathies at face value, but looking deeper to see the universal truths that respect all peoples.

So when we hear Paul contrast “the law” with “grace,” we must not fall into the simplistic practice of equating “the law” with the Old Testament, that is Judaism, and labeling that “bad,” while simultaneously hearing “grace” and equating that with Christianity and labeling it “good.” Of course it is not that simple! The truth is that the Hebrew scriptures are full of the good news of God’s mercy and compassion. And plenty of Christian doctrine has fallen into legalistic rigidity. Both of these impulses are present in both traditions, indeed I would say, in all people. There is no need to externalize the legalism Paul rejects as a Jewish thing we have overcome. To do so

would be both dishonest and damaging. Instead, we must examine our own souls for such tendencies and repent of our habit of pretending we are better than we are.

So, now that we've had an introduction as long as a sermon, let us begin! Given Paul's themes here in chapter six, I thought it might be fun – on this Independence Day weekend – to riff on Patrick Henry's defiant call to "Give me liberty or give me death!" Paul touches here on liberty, but he talks even more about death. There's another theme here though, that he talks about even more, one that would have been better suited to Juneteenth weekend: slavery. Three themes and two of them we'd prefer never to talk about. But of these three: liberty, death, and slavery, I think Paul is arguing that they are inseparable. He's not crying "liberty or death!"; he's saying first of all, that our sense of liberty is often delusional. We think ourselves free, but only because we so often don't recognize or admit to the things that hold us in thrall. Those forces may be very different in our day and age than they were in Paul's time, but we cannot deny that there are still things that hold us captive. That's what he's calling slavery. And then he's not saying that we should demand our freedom or be willing to die to achieve it. He's saying that death is the way to liberty. Not physical death, of course, but what he calls dying with Christ to sin, as symbolized by our baptism.

And here's where I'm going to add some interpretation and use some language Paul does not. He doesn't use the word "humility," and he doesn't use the word "trust," but I think that's what he's getting at. We find true freedom when we practice and embody humble trust in God. That is the posture with which we approach baptism and

the posture our faith encourages us to live with forever after our baptism. Trust in God is the obedience Paul is asking us to obey, following in the way of Jesus. Jesus obeyed, even to the point of death on the cross, not because he was rejecting his own life and worth, but because he trusted that God loved him so much that his death would be overcome. Instead of pretending we can be free on our own, Paul is inviting us into a life in which we are upheld by God, unafraid of sin or death or anything else that would try to enslave us. We are invited to die to sin so that we can be part of the life in which God is setting all things right. It's not that a switch is flipped and we are never tempted to do wrong again, as we will explore next week. But we're no longer trapped, held by forces from which we have no hope of rescue.

For those of us who grew up in the church and have lived relatively easy lives, it can be hard to fully appreciate the drama of this liberation. But for those who've come through hardship – abuse, addiction, discrimination – it's easier to see. And all of us have ways in which legalistic judgment seeps insidiously into our minds, telling us we're not trying hard enough, or we don't deserve that good thing we want, or we will never be able to break the bad habit that plagues us. “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” Paul asks. “By no means!” Grace abounds, regardless of what we do. We don't turn that faucet on by our increased need for forgiveness. It's more that God's grace is like the oxygen we're breathing, and our baptism brings us from an atmosphere without much oxygen, to one where there is plenty.

As people who live lives mostly removed from the harsh realities of slavery, people who literally celebrate our independence, it can be hard to admit our need for liberation. It can feel almost offensive to hear Paul telling us we're going to be enslaved to something, so we'd better make sure it's God. I can only imagine what it felt like to a newly Christian Roman who had been an enslaver and was having to figure out how to leave that life behind. This is where that humility comes in again. We don't often slow down enough to consider what forces are driving our lives. Why do we do the things we do? What prompts us to spend our time and our money on the things we spend them on? What sorts of situations make us feel trapped? What kinds of experiences help us experience joyful liberation?

Paul talks a lot about "righteousness" in these verses; we might talk about love, keeping in the back of our mind the reminder that "justice is what love looks like in public." The feeling of being aligned with the love of God, the justice of God, the righteousness of God is a feeling of liberation. Living from a place of trusting God's abundant grace means living without fear, without fear of death or sin or enslavement. Being willing to let the tendencies within us that would push us back into the traps of legalism and judgment die, to bury them in the waters of baptism, allows us to embrace the freedom of life in Christ. This is good news! There is no need to change the ending, for God has already set it right. Hallelujah and Amen!