

JULY 12, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Slavery and Freedom" Romans 6:19-23, I Corinthians 6:19-20

This weekend is notably celebrating a national holiday: Independence Day. Through the celebration two words are thrown about and for many almost interchangeable, independence and freedom. But they aren't the same thing. The relationship in this day and time is important because these terms in our nation get confused with the same in our faith.

Independence: Independence is the condition of being free from outside control, support, or influence. It involves self-reliance and the ability to make your own decisions or govern yourself without relying on others.

Freedom: Freedom is the power or right to act, speak, and think without undue external restraint or coercion. It encompasses the absence of oppression ("freedom from") alongside the ability to pursue your own potential and shape your destiny

Independence often informs what we do with our freedom. It also can determine how much freedom we have. For example, we are free to think whatever and however we like. Do we also think independently? Or do we ride a bandwagon?

Many think they are independent yet tow the line with the leaders from their own "tribe" so to speak. Because of how our culture has divided it can even feel dangerous to think independent within your own group. To think differently and question is seen as disloyal. In secular and religious groups alike that kind of thing can be met with rejection, attack, and many forms of harshness. Even if we have independent ideas, we may not feel free to express them.

There are people who are "independently wealthy". They don't have to work and have plenty of available resources. By virtue of this they have more freedom. More time to use. More resources to engage whatever opportunities they wish. Contrasting is someone who has to work 12 hour days 6 days a week just to pay rent and have food to eat. They don't share that same freedom because of their responsibilities and needs.

Freedom and independence have always been squirrely partners through history.

They play off of one another and as much as we'd like to talk about freedom as some blanket benefit available to all that isn't the case. The way one person exercises their freedom many times limits the freedom for someone else.

We often talk fondly of Europeans who left to come to the New World. One thing I argue they all shared was a spirit of independence that shaped the attitudes of what would one day become the USA. They had to. Whether striking out to make a fortune, running from legal troubles, being shunned by family or community, or looking to practice religion as they chose a common trait had to be a willingness to shake of the controls and reliances at home in favor of carving their own path on an adventure with an uncertain future.

Freedom was another matter. Many of the religious folks wanted freedom to do faith THEIR WAY. The other side of that coin was that when they established towns no other way of worship was allowed. They wanted their freedom, but that freedom included feeling entitled to deprive others of that same freedom. It was freedom to do faith their way, not your own. One freedom limiting the freedom of another.

Settlers felt free to exert themselves to gain land and control over resources. They did it differently than the people already living here. Different faith, different systems of governing, different understandings of trade and ownership. Over time their freedom to exert themselves meant that the people they were engaging or displacing had more and more limitations on what they were free to do and how they were free to act. In fact ultimately they weren't even able to be citizens of this nation until 1924. Which was absolutely limiting in freedom.

This is all history. History is what lays the foundation for things to come. All through it groups and individuals exerted a combination of independence and freedom in ways that brought about wonderful advancements and ideas. That same combination also brought about terrible injustices and problems.

Christianity wasn't spared this. Individuals and groups formed incredible communities of faith that brought about grand support for those in need and provided a hub of spiritual growth. There were also those who decided to take hold of faith and use it for their own means and gains at the expense of people who didn't even know they were being taken for a ride. Now today suddenly it's like everything is subjective, agendas and politics drive what people want to support. And churches are far too willing to shape their message and the gospel target a particular subgroup. Which abandons Jesus in the process.

It's interesting because many Christian leaders create their own boxes of freedom and authority cherry picking scriptures and playing fast and loose. The biggest box is those who have the most freedom and authority. Then

those boxes get smaller and smaller depending on who you are. That works really well for the people who land in that biggest box. And gives motive to hold everyone else in check in those smaller boxes because so many are more interested in control than they are in the true gospel freedom that lies in Christ.

Our system of freedom has imposed limitations. This is with good reason. Total freedom means I can do whatever I want. Something has to be in place to protect us from one another. Of course there are always loopholes and ways around systems that allow for exploiting others. And if you can do it without getting caught, skirting the edge of the law, or have the money and power to influence the powers that be you have the freedom to do whatever without consequence.

All of this makes for a tricky mixture ripe with potential as well as temptation.

Scripture talks about being slaves to sin. In truth we are all slaves to multiple things. And that's not a criticism. We have to be and fortunately many times we have the freedom to decide what those things will be.

Want a happy marriage? You have to be a slave to the marriage covenant.

Want a healthy body? Become a slave to workout routines and dietary restrictions

Need to hold your job? Slave to the requirements of that job to keep it

We can also become a slave to hobbies, substances, experiences(adrenaline junkies anyone?), habits, and many other behaviors and attitudes.

What masters do we have that we use for the good of life, and what masters do we have that are damaging and doing us and the world around us harm? This is a critical question.

Moreso, what is our overarching master? Where is our full loyalty? What or who pervades every other endeavor we have in our hearts and lives?

This is the most significant question. Because a lot of people would say "Jesus" out of reflex. But their lives don't bear that out in example and actual lived out commitments. And of course others do.

This is what our scriptures are aiming at this morning. All of us have a master. Who is it?

Because if it's Jesus there is another necessary reality that we touched at earlier.

Every freedom has its impact on others. Every independence comes with a responsibility. And every master places limits on both.

Looking at this weekend's celebrations there is a very real question. What am I first, and American or a Christian? Because where America might grant me "rights" or "freedoms" as a Christian I don't get to indulge all of them.

I have the freedom to lie and cheat. I have the freedom to fool around on my spouse. I have the freedom to ignore your needs in order for me to amass more and more material wealth. I can select groups of people that I don't like and claim that they aren't welcome around me and don't deserve any help no matter how dire their situation.

I have the freedom and independence to turn Jesus and the gospel into whatever I want. I can convince as many people as I'm able to follow me. There's no law preventing anyone from just starting up their own church with whatever message they decide on. And we live in an age where people want their cultural and political ears tickled so much that if I can play that game and twist Jesus into whomever they want Him to be I may be able to get a lot of takers. Most people haven't truly studied scripture to know the difference.

I can do all of that as an American. Not as a Christian.

All of the above leads to sin. And slavery to sin is to be free, or apart from, God. Slavery to Christ is freedom from sin. The difference is where the "master" puts the limits.

Paul talks about the freedom to indulge without limit those "things about which there is no law". The fruits of the Spirit. Notice that the limitless are not specific behaviors. They are attitudes that shape our behaviors and always point us back to Jesus. By indulging those things we automatically limit our options. By caring, loving, seeking the best in the other, all of this, and as scripture reminds us doing so without condition, suddenly there are ways of treating, viewing, and speaking about others that are flatly off the table.

Adopting this sense of slavery to Christ isn't a burden. Yes, human slavery is abhorrent. This isn't that. This is letting go of our own fallible judgment so that we have access to perfect desire and the perfect will of God. Making Jesus, the genuine Christ, our master frees us from the consequences of sin.

This is both in this life and eternally. All the mess our sin creates in our life and in the lives around us diminishes over time. The more we bring others into this relationship with God the more those consequences diminish around our communities.

Then one day when we are free from this world we are present in the perfect Kingdom of our Creator.

Who is your Master? Who and what have you chosen to be a slave to?

In communion we celebrate the passage we read that says "you were bought with a price". That price is the cross.

We've been purchased but unlike worldly slavery we get to choose if we go with the Master who paid the cost. The question for all of us is to look at the life of Jesus. What did He truly ask of us? Then look at how my life, your life, reflects His image. Then we know to whom we belong.