

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“The Children of God: Strings Attached”
Genesis 14:17-24; Romans 6:15-23
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There is a wide spectrum of television commercials. Some are funny. Others are inspiring. Some are direct and to the point. There are some however that are just plain creepy. And one of those creepy commercials for me is the one with the life-size puppets. The commercial has this ordinary guy who has evidently married into a family of puppets...and has a son who is a puppet. They all go around hanging from strings. What is being advertised is a cable company whose products do not need wires...or strings if you will. On the one hand we might suppose that this is very clever way of having people notice that this company can make your home a bit neater than it was before; that when you hook up all of your video devices to your television there will be no exposed wires. On the other hand though, I want to believe that the advertisers were trying to strike a deeper chord with the public. In this case I believe that they wanted us to associate their product with freedom. In other words, by choosing our product you will be the one who is free...and not bound by strings that bind others.

If that is the case, that they want us to associate their product with freedom, they would find a ready-made audience almost anywhere in the world. I say this because I believe that most of us in this room this morning, would love to live a life with no strings attached. We all grow up in a world with strings attached. As children the strings are pulled by our parents, relatives and teachers. They want us to dance to their tunes and expectations. As we grow older there are others who want to attach their strings to us; culture, the media, cliques of friends, sports teams, schools and the list goes on and on. When we emerge into the working world we have companies, clients, supervisors, corporate cultures and the like who want to make us do as they direct. When we have children, as one parent reminded me, we dance to their tune of homework, sports and friendships. Yet all along the way, from the time we turn two and learn the word no, we resist the strings and long for pure independence. Our lives are spent trying to cut the cords in order that we might be free to be ourselves; to live a life with no strings attached.

We see this clearly in our morning's story about Abram. The background to the story is that there had been a battle between nine kings; five versus four. Initially the four defeat the five and in the process the four kings capture Lot, who was Abram's nephew. Abram is not pleased so he rounds up his men and some friends and defeats the four kings, thus freeing Lot. Upon his return he is met by one of the defeated kings, the King of Sodom, who encourages Abram to keep much of the spoils of victory for himself. On this surface this appears to be generous. The King of Sodom says, hey Abram, I am happy to share with you what was originally mine. Abram will have none of it. For if the King of Sodom can say, look I made Abram wealthy, then Abram owes him loyalty. Abram will have to dance to his tune...and this is not what Abram wants. He desires a string free life. Abram therefore refuses the offer and merely asks that those who helped him receive something.

Freedom, the string free life, as I said a moment ago, is one of the great goals of virtually every human being. This is one of the reasons that the early church was so attractive. It allowed people to shed the strings of their cultures and find freedom in a fashion that they could have scarcely imagined. For you and me it is hard to imagine the cultural pressure that existed in the Roman Empire. People's lives were governed by a strict and strictly enforced set of cultural values. To step outside of those values was to risk one's life and livelihood. People were told what they could wear, where they could live, what jobs

they could hold, how they were to interact with others and on and on. Everyone danced to the strings of the Roman culture. Along comes Christianity though and it proclaims that these cords have been cut; that there is freedom in Jesus Christ. Slowly but surely people began to gravitate to the church, because at least within the church, there was a freedom to become new and different people living new and different lives.

The problem with this image of a new string free life was that it led people to acts that were not Christ-like; that were in fact antithetical to Christian living. So Paul has to remind his readers that while they were free from sin, they were not free from God. In other words, there is no string free life. He writes, *“But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves to sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that have been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”* Notice that Paul uses the same language to describe one’s life before Christ and after Christ; the language of slavery, or in our case this morning the language of strings. In other words the only real question for the Romans was who did they desire to have pulling their strings? The idea of a neutral position of freedom from which people could choose to do or not do good was, for Paul, an impossibility. And I believe he considered it impossible because as a good Jew Paul understood the power of sin, and especially of the primordial sin of Adam and Eve. Their sin was the belief that human beings could be wise enough to choose for themselves the good; and we are all witness to the results of that choice.

Paul’s contention that a string free life is not possible is one of the most difficult concepts in his writings for most 21st Century people to accept. I saw this first hand at a presbytery meeting where a candidate for ordination wrote in her statement of faith that we all have free will. When I asked her about her belief, quoting from our morning’s passage, she looked at me blankly and repeated that we are all free agents capable of our own moral choices. Her answer showed that, we, like the Romans, want our independence.

If Paul is correct however, which I believe he is, that there is no string free life, the question becomes not will we choose to be a slave of sin or of God, it is instead will we choose to cooperate or oppose God’s control of our lives? My hope is that we will choose to cooperate and here is the reason. It is the reason that Tiger Woods has a ‘swing’ coach. It is the reason that professional tennis players have coaches. It is the reason professional baseball teams have hitting and pitching coaches. The reason is that if we are to become the best we can be in any endeavor we need someone outside of ourselves who can critique us and guide us into better practices. The same is true for being followers of Jesus Christ; we need God, to guide us from outside of ourselves so that our lives more fully reflect that of Jesus Christ. For you see, God created us to be human beings capable of living lives that reflect the love, grace, forgiveness, compassion and sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth. We, on our own, are not capable of doing that. If we allow God to pull our strings, to guide our lives, then we grow more and more fully into the image of Christ. This is called sanctification. Paul writes, *“But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.”* Paul reminds us that being enslaved to God, or allowing God to take control is not so that God can make us mere puppets in some great play, but so that God can lead us to the fullness of life; so God can lead us to becoming more and more Christ-like; or as we said last week, to become more and more the kind of people who choose to be part of the League of Extraordinary Followers that God created us to be.

My challenge to you for this week then is this, to ask yourselves, How am I cooperating with God in such a way that I become more and more the person God desires me to be?