

Date: June 21, 2026 (4th Sunday after Pentecost, series A) (Proper 7)

Title: “Signing Up”

Text: Jer 20:7-13

I have signed up for so many “online accounts” with so many different companies and organizations that I can’t even remember or keep track of them all. And for the most part, that’s OK. It’s a little frustrating sometimes to discover that something has gotten renewed automatically, that I actually wanted to cancel. But *a lot* of those online accounts don’t even involve paying for anything, at all.

- I can access my health records, over here, and read *The Atlantic*, over there...
- I can get to my CRA account through one website, and book my health-care appointments, through another.

It’s all *super*-convenient, *relatively* easy, and *generally* pretty painless. In other words, it’s **not at all like** the way things work in our relationship with God, in all of today’s readings!

In our first Bible reading (from Jeremiah 20), the process of “signing up with God” doesn’t even seem to be voluntary. **“You deceived me, Lord,”** Jeremiah says, **“and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed.”** (Jer 20:7) That doesn’t even sound *legal*, right?—never mind *ethical*! And then the prophet carries on: **“If I say, ‘I will not mention [the Lord’s] word or speak anymore in his name, his word is in my heart like a fire—a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in: indeed, I cannot!’”** (v.9) That almost makes it sound like Jeremiah’s account has been *hacked*, to make him feel so helpless... caught... entrapped!

One of the reasons this is so surprising is because the relationship you and I have with God *often* seems to be the *opposite* of that. We’re *happy* that the Lord is “there for us,” and we consider him to be a deeply trusted partner in every part of our life. We love the “goods and services” he provides... we’re happy to receive (and at least glance at) his promotional material... and we’re eager to find out what new developments he’s going to be coming up with next. To play with Jeremiah’s words just a little, it’s like you and I can often say, **“You wooed me, Lord, and I was wooed! You won me over, and I am yours.”**

Sometimes, though, our relationship with God *does* feel a lot like Jeremiah’s. Then, we have a deep and unsettling sense that the Lord really is leading us to places we *don’t* want to go... pushing situations our way that we are *not* ready for... asking us to do and say things we have *no* appetite for, at all. Having God’s Word **“burning in our bones like a fire”** is not at all a comforting (or comfortable) thing, at times like those! We *know* God wants us to do this... say this... or be this. But we on our side don’t consider that to be something we signed up for.

What our second reading helps us understand is *why* we feel like that. The answer is because “signing up with God” is (in some ways) like **“becoming a slave.”** (Rom 6:22) Some of our translations soften that wording, by saying that we are **“servants”** instead of slaves. That’s already a bit of a shock, in the sense that *servants too* are people who have to do all sorts of things they might not want to. But **“being a slave to God”** seems harder still! (22) Obviously, that’s better than **“being a slave to sin,”** which is the *other* “master” Paul talks about all the way through this reading. (16) *That* kind of slavery **“leads to death”**... and even before it kills us, having *sin* as our master is awful. By its very nature, sin demands *more and more* out of us, all the time, while giving us *less and less* in return. (16, 21, 23)

In that sense, it really is a wonderful, welcome, and positively life-changing event when we find ourselves being *bought* out of slavery to sin, and *sold* into slavery to God! Instead of being slaves to a pattern of life that is full of “**impurity and ever-increasing wickedness**”—and finally leads to death—“*now*,” Paul says, “**you and I have been set free from sin.**” Instead, we have become “**slaves to righteousness.**” (22, 18) And the “*benefit*” we gain from this *new* kind of slavery is “**sanctification**” (not wickedness, but “**holiness**”)—“**and the result**” of it all “**is eternal life.**” (22)

Do you recognize what this incredibly positive *transfer* (from one kind of slavery to another) feels like, in everyday life? We sense it when (for instance) we feel *very strongly led* to do or to say something that blesses other people and serves God. Of course, even then, we always have an out, since God never “binds us hand and foot” with literal chains, or lashes us with an actual whip. Instead, as Paul tells us *five* different times in this reading, we “**yield**” ourselves to God, in whatever new situation he is leading us into. Do I *lose* some of my “freedom,” when I *allow* the Lord to do his work through me? Absolutely! But the way Paul urges us to think about it, what we are *mostly* losing is our “**freedom to sin.**” *Instead*, Paul says, “**you [and I] have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which [we] have been committed.**” (17) And that “**standard of teaching**” *confirms* (at every point) what our hearts already tell us—namely, that *even when* God is pushing us, or nudging us, or even in a certain sense “compelling” us to do this or that—“that exact thing is *what we were made for*,” before *sin* came along and *forced us* into its cruel, selfish, and anti-social kind of slavery instead.

Obedying God’s call to do this or that, gives you and me the same sort of feeling Paul had, early in his ministry, when some of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem asked him “**to remember the poor.**” Do you remember Paul’s response? “*That*,” Paul said, “**was the very thing I was eager to do!**” (Gal 2:10) That’s how it feels for you and too, when God calls, leads, and urges us (as his slaves) to do and say godly and God-pleasing things. “**Yes, sir!**,” we say, with all the heartfelt readiness our “new self” can muster—“**that’s exactly what I am eager to do!**”

The third example of “high-cost, high-reward” relationship that we’re hearing about today is in our Gospel reading. As we heard in its opening verse, this is part of the “mission instructions” that Jesus gave to the 12 apostles when he sent them out on what you and I might call a short-term mission trip.

Here too, a lot of our Saviour’s focus is on the *cost* of being his “**slaves.**” At least potentially, his slaves run the risk of being betrayed... facing rebellion... being hated... and being persecuted. (Matthew 10:21-23) In fact, Jesus recognizes (three separate times toward the end of this reading) that we will almost certainly “**be afraid**” from time to time, when we’re out there on *our* mission of doing his work in the world. (26, 28, 31) Maybe we even wish (at times) that our Master would do all of *his own* mission-work, himself! But clearly, that *isn’t* the way this works. “**A student is not above their teacher,**” Jesus says, “**nor is a slave above their master! It is enough for a student to be like their teacher, and for a slave to be like their master.**” (24-25) So: even as *Jesus* suffered to the point of death, to serve and save us, he calls us now too to suffer—maybe even to the point of death—in order to serve and save others, in his name.

The offsetting or compensating factor here is of course what Jesus tells us right at the end of this reading. “**Whoever confesses me before others,**” Jesus says, “**I will also confess before my Father in heaven.**” (32) The word “**confess**,” in this context, means more than just the bare fact that Jesus promises to acknowledge us, as if we were only just one of his customers. That’s part of it, but there’s so much more! When Jesus “**confesses**” us, he is promising to stand by us... stand up

for us... and take responsibility for us, *as* our Master. It's true that all those things are rare in the relationships you and I have these days with most of the companies and organizations we belong to. But becoming God's slaves by "**confessing Jesus**" as our Saviour, makes us part of God's family—now and forever.

- And *as* part of his family, we can be sure that God will never take advantage of us, or scam us.
- He will never kick us off his network, or cancel our account.
- No "malware" from his server is ever going to show up on our hard-drive, and we never have to worry that any of the "wealth" he deposits into our account on a regular basis is going to be "hacked" (and disappear).

Instead, as Jesus says in this reading, "**Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father's care... and each of us is worth more than many sparrows!**" (29, 31) *There* is a security guarantee we can count on!

So, in just a few minutes, you and I are going to have the opportunity to *say* to God, "Sign me up!"

- A number of you are going to be joining this congregation (and, in most cases, the Lutheran family too) as brand-new members. To those of you who are in that position, all the rest of us want to say, "Welcome aboard! Welcome to the family! Welcome to our church!"
- Most of us though are going to be re-affirming our membership—whether or not this is the actual "anniversary date" of our own original commitment. For us, today is a perfect time to "review the terms of our contract," and to get all the details that pertain to our membership back into our head once again. "Oh yeah! This is what I'm saying I *believe*, by being a member of this church, and this is what I'm agreeing to *do*, as a member of this church. Great, I've got it! I'm happy to 'sign on again,' indefinitely."

For sure, there is a real *cost* to these commitments. We're not just floating around anymore after we make them, free to sample a little of this and a little of that, from here and there.

- Instead, as "**slaves of God**," we are agreeing to let his Word enter our heart "**like a fire—a fire shut up in our bones.**" With Jeremiah, we too want to say, "**To you, O Lord, I have committed my cause.**" (Jer 20:9, 12)
- Like St. Paul, we are agreeing to be "**obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which we have been committed.**" Nobody is forcing us to do that, but we *want* to be "**set free from sin, and become slaves to righteousness.**" (Rom 6:17)
- Like our Saviour's first disciples, we are not "**students who stand above our teacher, or slaves who think they are better than their master.**" Instead, we are happy to "**confess**" Jesus as our Saviour, in front of the world—in the sure and certain hope that he, in turn, will also "**confess us**" as his own, in front of his Father in heaven. (Matt 10:24, 32)

So: May our *slavery* to God, through Jesus our Lord, always be heartfelt... and joyful... and fulfilling... *now* as we serve him here on earth, and *then* when we receive God's great and final gift of "**eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" (Rom 6:23) Thanks be to God! Amen.