

It's been a big weekend of celebration for this country. *This* 4<sup>th</sup> of July marking 250 years since the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. There've been events all over the country, parades, fireworks, the kind of things folks have been doing for generations on the 4th.

One thing about the run up to this 4<sup>th</sup> of July that's been a bit different, was the kick-off event that coincided with the President's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Back in the middle of June, celebrations for the 250<sup>th</sup> began with the UFC (which stands for Ultimate Fighting Championship). The UFC built a massive octagonal fight-cage on the lawn of the White House, and thousands of folks were invited in to celebrate the occasion with a night of fighting.

Now, whatever you thought about this event, whether you loved it, or not, it does reveal something about the dominant culture of these United States. We fight. Fighting absolutely has a central place in our collective imagination and in our country's story.

I don't think this is because we, the nation of the United States, are collectively *bad*. I think we inherited a belief in the necessity of fighting, of violence, and we've never let it go because we don't really trust any other way of getting or keeping the way of life we want; fighting for what we want has a track record, it's been tested.

We 'fight' – figuratively and literally - for all kinds of things: we fight for freedom, justice, democracy, liberty; we fight for our health, for our relationships; we fight 'the system,' we fight corruption, we fight for what's right. We fight for our lives. Fighting is embedded in our language.

And it's deep in our collective imagination. Our stories are often about the fight between good and bad, good and *evil*, the battle between the hero and the villain, the good guys and the bad. The idea of a war between opposing forces, the righteous and the wicked, the godly and the nefarious has run through our storytelling, through the way we tell our history, even. It's in the way news stories are reported, it plays a huge role in partisan politics, it hands us a worldview that is *us vs. them*.

This perception of an ongoing fight doesn't just shape our lives in the world, it also plays a role in our spiritual lives. We can feel we need to fight our own selves, do battle with our own nature. We sin, even when we really don't want to, and the story we're told says, if we could just be tougher, have greater control over our will, then we'd over-power sin, beat it, triumph over it.

In our reading from the Letter to the Romans, Paul wonders about the struggle I think every one of us can understand: why don't we do the good we want to do, why, instead, do we repeatedly do what we don't want to do?

Paul *doesn't say* we should fight: fight sin harder, dominate, triumph over our will... Given how Paul lays out his understanding of sin, fighting would be entirely useless. Fighting would get us nowhere, in fact, fighting will only make it worse.

For Paul, sin is a force, it's a power. Sin dominates, imprisons, enslaves – to believe that a *fight* with sin could ever be winnable, is to misunderstand the reality of sin in the world.

The 'fight' can't save us, can't ever make us free, because the fight depends on the violence of domination and control; and domination and control never liberate.

Fighting keeps us trapped, trapped in a cycle of violence, while bringing us no closer to freedom and fullness of life for all.

If we were to think of sin not as a moral failure, not as an individual or collective weakness, but as a very real power, a power that is in the world and is strong enough to influence and take control of our thinking and doing, then we can begin to think about what that power has built in this world, what it holds in place, and why it's pointless to *fight* it.

Sin is like an invading force, a force that entered the world as a result of humans choosing to separate themselves from God and each other. Sin is like an invading, colonizing empire that settled in the human person. This colonizing force insists we have no real need for God, not for most of human life, we got it, we're strong enough and clever enough. Sin is a force that convinces us we are in charge, so we should rightly trust in our own efforts rather than in the presence and action of a mysterious and invisible God.

Sin is a force that stokes entitlement, exceptionalism, resentment, jealousy, division, exclusion, self-centeredness, superiority, fear ... and so it's no wonder we fight.

Sin convinces us we need to fight, to survive, or for what we want, because we can have control, we are in control.

Sin has us use force, wield power, force change, dominate; because these are aspects of sin. Sin essentially teaches us itself.

And a chunk of humanity has learned, from sin's colonizing presence, to always be ready to fight, that we must fight, that fighting is unavoidable.

In our reading from Romans, Paul not only affirms the very real presence of sin within us, but also, crucially, the liberating presence and power of the Spirit of Christ.

We can't get free of sin by fighting, it's only the mighty life-creating and life-giving truth of God, also within us, that can lead us to freedom, that can get us free of sin's grip on our thinking and our acting.

God has made God's presence known. Christ entered human history to give us a Way to get free.

It's a choice ... not a war.

We get to choose life, we don't need to fight for it.

Jesus' invitation is to rest, to slow down, to really know the world as it is, the forces and powers at work in it.

"Learn from me" he says, "for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

True freedom, freedom from the oppression of sin, not just for each of us but for the world, will never come from domination or control, by humans flexing their capacity for violence to demand they get what they want.

True freedom is only possible by not being *of* the world that sin has built, by refusing to conform our lives to the way sin teaches us to live.

For us, as members of God's church, Jesus is freedom from sin.

Jesus' Way – a way of love, welcome and hospitality, of relationship, a way that invites and includes, and that trusts God's power (not the world's systems of power and domination) it's a way that trusts God's power to heal and to restore and to transform.

Jesus' Way transforms through repentance and forgiveness of our attachment to sin, and by our consenting, instead, to God's presence and action in our lives; Jesus' way values faithfulness over selfish comfort, or success, or even survival.

It is the Way of abundant life for all.

Jesus calls us to rest, to step away from the fight.

Jesus calls us to learn from *him*, because true freedom is the triumph of the love of God; and that's a victory won in the human heart, and never by force.