

## FREE INDEED

John 8:31-36

Reformation Day (observed)

October 29, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for Reformation Sunday comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 8, verses 31 through 36. It is on page 758 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus makes some enemies by making some rather nice promises. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 8, beginning at verse 31, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>31</sup> So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." <sup>33</sup> They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

---

The Reformation is about one man and his work. It's tempting to make it about something else. It's tempting to use it as a source of pride in order to elevate ourselves over other Christians. Sometimes it's tempting to use it as a political agenda. It's even tempting to use it to make heroes out of other secondary men. But the Reformation is really about one man and his work—a man who was hated by the religious big shots and persecuted by the Roman Empire. And his name, of course, is Jesus Christ.

He is the Son of God, and, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36).

---

It's hard to imagine how such gracious words could be met with such violent hatred. And, yet, they were. If we read on a bit more we'll find a war of words, in which the Jesus haters imply that he was an illegitimate child (8:41). Jesus then calls these particular Jews children of the devil (8:44).

This, by the way, is one of those places where we see that Jesus was not always so meek and mild. Despite the long hair and the beard, Jesus was no hippie. He could be a little bit mean when such behavior was justified. But I don't recommend following his example and calling people children of the devil. You're not Jesus. You can't see what's in a person. But Jesus could, so he did call these particular Jews children of the devil.

The haters responded by accusing Jesus of being a Samaritan and demon-possessed (8:48). It finally comes to a head when they pick up stones in order to kill Jesus (8:59). That kind of proved Jesus' point about them being children of the devil. But it wasn't quite time yet for Jesus to die, so he decided not to. We read that he "hid himself and went out of the temple" (8:59).

Then we stop and think, *Wait a minute. They were going to stone him to death in the temple?* Yep; they were really mad. But why?

---

The thing that gave them an excuse to kill Jesus, or so they thought, was his claim to be God—the same God who revealed himself to Abraham (8:58). This—if it were not actually true—amounted to blasphemy—a crime punishable by death. This was their excuse, or justification, for trying to kill Jesus. But it's not the thing that made them really mad. The thing that made them really mad is in the text we just read, when Jesus implied that they were slaves who needed to be set free (8:32). It also didn't help later when he called them children of the devil, but the first thing that seems to get them riled up is merely the implication that they need to be set free.

And this is the thing about Jesus that really ends up being offensive—both then and now—the notion that we are slaves who need to be set free.

Notice that at first, Jesus doesn't even say anything about them being slaves. He simply says, **"The truth will set you free"** (8:32). We see later that by "truth," Jesus means himself. We see this when he goes on to say, **"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** We also see it in chapter 14, when Jesus says, **"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"** (14:6). But for now it's simply, **"The truth will set you free."** And the *implication* is that these Jews are slaves of something. Do you see how that might be offensive?

This would be like someone walking up to you on the golf course and saying, "Hey, would you like me to teach you how to be a *good* golfer?" You might look at him a little sideways and say, "What are you implying?"

So "they answered him, 'We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, "You will become free"?' " (8:33).

So they're picking up what Jesus is laying down. And they understand that Jesus is talking about some kind of *spiritual* slavery. He's not talking about a political or social slavery. That just wouldn't make any sense. Politically, the Jews had been enslaved to many foreign nations, including Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Syria, and now Rome. Everyone there knew better than to understand this in a political sense. And the social institution of slavery wouldn't make any sense either. Some Jews were slaves according to the social institution, but certainly not all of them. So the conversation wouldn't make any sense from either side if it were speaking of social slavery.

Instead, they rightly understood Jesus to be speaking of *spiritual* slavery and freedom. And this is what offended them so deeply. They were descendants of Abraham. God had made promises to Abraham and his offspring. So they believed they had a right standing with God simply by virtue of the blood in their veins. So they ask, "How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

And Jesus has the proof they need. He says, **"Truly, truly"**—and, by the way, whenever Jesus says, **"Truly, truly,"** we know it's really important. So Jesus says, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin"** (8:34). Do you want to know if you are a slave? Just one question: *Do you sin?* If the answer is, *Yes*—and it is—then you are a slave.

Now, the objection might be, "Wait a minute. Just because I practice sin doesn't mean I'm a slave to it. I can quit whenever I want." To which we would say, "Okay, prove it." Take that one sin—maybe there are several of them, but just pick the one that stands out—take that one sin

that keeps coming up again and again, and quit. Just stop doing it. See how it goes. Now, maybe you'll be really inspired to prove all the doubters wrong, and maybe you'll do okay for a while. I hope you do.

But what about that moment when you're really tired, and things just aren't going right, and you snap at your children or your spouse or a coworker. Or what about that moment when you're feeling neglected; people aren't appreciating you like they should. So you boast. You tell a story about yourself to make sure they know just how awesome you are. Or what about that moment when you're feeling kind of sorry for yourself, and you just don't care anymore, so you just do what you want, and you just don't care.

Or maybe you actually do a pretty decent job. That one particular sin—it actually becomes a little less frequent. That's great. But then you realize there's always something else. If nothing else, pride will always fill the place of that old sin. And then pride will spawn all sorts of new sins. And then you realize the problem isn't really all the little *individual* sins. I mean, those are bad, right? But the root of the problem goes much deeper. It goes to the core of who we really are. The problem is our nature. The problem isn't really all the *individual* sins. The problem is the sin *nature* which causes all those individual sins. All those individual sins simply prove to us that we are slaves to sin. We can't just quit whenever we want. It's like Jesus says: **"Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."**

So the freedom Jesus brings isn't so much a liberation from the things *outside* of us that oppress us. It is freedom from that which is *in* us.

But wouldn't we feel better about ourselves if our oppressors were someone outside of us. At least then we could feel morally superior to our oppressors. The only time we really feel good about needing to be freed from something is when we can work up a victim mentality. Then we can blame our slavery on someone else. But we can't really work up a victim mentality when the person who victimizes us is ourselves. It doesn't work to feel morally superior to our oppressor when our oppressor is our own nature. It doesn't work to feel morally superior to yourself. So we chafe at this idea that the problem is in us. We are offended by the implication that we are slaves to sin.

But it's true. Whether we like it or not, and regardless of how deeply it offends us, it's true.

---

So what do we do? How do we get ourselves free? Well, the problem is we can't. That's the nature of slavery. You can't free yourself. It's not like your regular nine-to-five where you can just turn in your two weeks' notice and be done with it. Slavery means you're stuck, whether you like it or not.

But here's the other thing about slavery: it's not necessarily permanent. A son is a son forever. This is the comparison Jesus makes (8:35). He can't be bought and sold. And this is good. But slavery is different. Slaves could be bought and sold.

Now that's not necessarily a good thing. No human being can be diminished to a piece of property. And, by the way, the Bible never condones slavery. It never approves of the institution. And, furthermore, the Bible never understands slavery as a racial thing, like we did in our country. Comparing slavery, as it was practiced in the United States, to the slavery we find in the Bible, is like comparing apples and orangutans. It's just not the same thing. But there are passages that accept the reality of slavery in order to set limits on it and to give moral instructions both to masters and to slaves. But let's get back to the main point.

One of the things about slavery is that it's not necessarily permanent. If a slave can be bought and sold, then a slave can also be bought and freed if that is the will of the person who purchases the slave. In theological terms, we call this "redemption."

So in the *Small Catechism*, when Luther explains the Second Article of "The Apostles' Creed," he teaches us to confess,

I believe that Jesus Christ ... is my Lord; who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, bought me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death.

Or, as Jesus puts it, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

---

Now there were two basic ways people became slaves in the ancient world. One way was when people were kidnapped or captured in a war and forced into slavery. This was, by far, the least fair kind of slavery.

But the other way, what was called "indentured servitude," was a little bit different. This was when you actually sold yourself into slavery. This was one of society's solutions to debt and poverty. If you ran up a debt you couldn't pay, instead of being thrown in prison, you could sell yourself into slavery to pay off the debt. Or if you were just flat broke, instead of being homeless and hungry, you could sell yourself into slavery where at least you would have food and shelter. It obviously wasn't an ideal situation, and it diminished people to a piece of property, but it was a sort of last ditch effort to avoid something worse.

Now, however you became a slave, the basic problem was the same: you were stuck. If your master was cruel, you were in for a world of trouble, because you had little or no chance at scraping together enough money to buy your way out. Your only hope—and you wouldn't really have any control over this—your only hope was for someone to purchase you away from the cruel master.

I don't know how common this was, but, at least theoretically, if slaves could be bought and sold, they could also be bought and freed.

---

And this is what Jesus is talking about regarding our spiritual slavery. He's talking about purchasing you for the purpose of setting you free.

In this analogy, we think of sin as a debt. And in order to purchase a slave who is in debt, the purchaser—or in the case of Jesus, the term *Redeemer* is most appropriate—the redeemer assumes the debt of the slave. In the case of Jesus, he assumes the sin-debt we have accrued.

It's not like God cancels our debt simply by snapping his fingers and saying, "It's gone." God does more than that. He gets his hands dirtier than that. Jesus Christ assumes our sin-debt into his own body. So in 1 Peter we read, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24). And in 2 Corinthians Paul says, "For our sake, [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). It's not as easy as God snapping his fingers or simply issuing and emancipation proclamation. He doesn't simply decree that our slavery is over. He ends the slavery by purchasing us out of it, and he purchases us out of it by paying everything we owe.

## FREE INDEED (John 8:31-36)

That, as we learned from this morning's epistle lesson (Rom. 3:19-28), is the just way to do it. He does not ignore our sin. He pays for it instead.

So in Colossians Paul says that God has "forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." (Col. 2:14)

The cross is how all of this happens. Dying a death reserved for criminals is the only way to pay the redemption price.

---

And this is what Jesus is working toward in the context of this gospel lesson. Jesus is no fool. He knows that when he implies these Jews are in slavery, they won't take it well. And he knows it won't get any better when he comes right out and says so, or even when he calls them children of the devil. Jesus knows exactly what he's doing. He doesn't incite them to hatred. He would much rather they believe in him and be saved. And many of the Jews did. But as for the ones who insisted on hating him, he brings their hatred and jealousy to the surface. He tells them the truth—both about themselves and himself—and they want to kill him for it. Then he gives them the excuse they need when he identifies himself as the God who spoke to Abraham.

Blasphemy is what that sounds like. And the only thing to do with blasphemers in those days was to kill them. And it wouldn't be much longer before Jesus let them do that very thing. This, after all, was the only way to pay their redemption price. Yes, even for those who killed him, Jesus paid the redemption price and prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And so he paid the redemption price for their debt and for ours.

And since Jesus has purchased us, we now belong to God. But this isn't another kind of slavery. This is true freedom, because Jesus has not purchased us in order to make us slaves. He has purchased us in order to make us God's children. This, at last, is true and eternal freedom. "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Amen.

---

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.