FREE INDEED

John 8:31-36
Reformation Day (Series C)
October 26, 2025
Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND
Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 8, verses 31 through 36. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 8, beginning at verse 31, we read in Jesus' name.

> **31** So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, **32** and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." **33** 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'?"
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> **34** Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. **35** The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. **36** 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.

How would you like to be set free? Jesus invites you to freedom, saying, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36). Would you like to be set free?

There are several ways we might respond to this, ranging from pure delight to disbelief to offense.

Imagine walking up to random people and saying, "I can set you free." If you're really adventurous, unlike me, you could try it for real and see what they say. Some people might think you're weird. Others might be offended. Suppose you go up to the barista at the coffee shop and say, "I can set you free." How would they respond? They might say, "You think this job is a prison? Get lost!" Or they might say, "Oh, yes! Get me out of here." Or try a random stranger on the street. They might be offended and say, "What is it you think I'm enslaved to?" You could go to a prison. And if a prisoner thinks you're legit, they might be delighted. Or if they don't believe you, they might laugh at you.

What if a random person walks up to you and says, "I can set you free?" I might laugh or be offended. "What, exactly, do you think I'm enslaved to? Who are you to think you can set me free from whatever you think my problem is?"

What if Jesus says that to you? What if a pastor says it on Jesus' behalf? "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Does that bring you joy? Or do you begrudge Jesus for presuming you are enslaved to something?

We all want to be free. We want to be our own bosses. We want to have the money, or power, or intelligence, or legal permission to do whatever we want. And we don't really want someone else to give it to us, because then we would feel like we are beholden to them or dependent on them. The purest form of freedom, we feel, is the kind that we obtain for ourselves, without anyone giving it to us. Consider children. When their parents give them permission to do something, they feel a certain degree of freedom, but it's limited, because it was granted by their

parents. The bigger freedom they crave is when they become adults and don't have to ask permission anymore. But when we do become adults, we usually realize that we're not really as free as we hoped. We are still subject to the laws of our land. We are beholden to our employer or other authorities. Most of all, we are subject to the consequences of our own actions, which our parents partially shielded us from while they taught us. When we become parents, we are beholden to the responsibility it requires. Or it could be some other responsibility we accept or are saddled with. Finally, at some point, our bodies begin to fail, and we slip toward death. We find that we are still enslaved to the law of death. The freedom our sinful souls crave is never really satisfied, because that freedom is not really freedom at all. This radical independence or autonomy we desire is not freedom, but idolatry. It is the desire to be our own gods. So Jesus comes along, saying, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." And we might bristle against this, thinking, *I don't need to be set free*. Even as Christians, we might think that we don't really need that much help. Maybe other Christians are weak, and they need Jesus like a crutch, but we take pride in not needing much help.

The freedom our sinful souls crave is not really freedom. It's the desire to be our own gods, and we will never obtain that. So, as long as we seek it, we will remain in slavery. True freedom only exists under good authority. Under strong and righteous parents, children experience freedom to learn, grow, explore, play, and create. Under good government with righteous laws, citizens experience freedom to support their life, raise a family, and work for the good of their neighbor. Under our King Jesus Christ, Christians experience freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil, so that we can grow in faith and knowledge of God, enjoy his creation, live out our vocations, and worship the true God here on earth, but especially in heaven forever. True freedom only exists under the gracious and protective authority of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This exchange occurs in Jerusalem, likely at the temple, where Jesus had been teaching. It could be at the tail end of the Feast of Booths, which John records in chapter 7. Or it could be sometime between that feast and the Feast of Dedication (10:22), more commonly known as Hanukkah. That would place this sometime in the fall of the year, between October and December, before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the following spring. It's about as close to the original Good Friday and Easter as we are to next year's observance. So this is part of the background of the conflict between Jesus and the rulers of the Jews that led to them demanding his crucifixion.

This passage is part of a bigger conversation in chapter 8. Earlier Jesus talked about how he is the light of the world (8:12). And he dropped some hints about his death. He talked about going away to a place where they could not follow him, so people wondered if he meant he was going to kill himself (8:21-22). But instead of killing himself, he predicted that the leaders of the Jews would kill him, saying, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he" (8:28). Jesus was speaking of being lifted up on a cross. All of this teaching took place in the temple, and many of the Jews believed in him. But since this was a public and open forum, there were also many who did not.

Later in the conversation, after the verses we will consider more this morning, Jesus accused the leaders of the Jews of being children of the devil (8:44). They did not take this well, and it escalated the situation. It culminated in Jesus saying, "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58). The Jews rightly understood this as a claim to be the LORD, Yahweh, who revealed himself throughout the Old Testament as the true God. Since they did not agree that Jesus is God, they

considered this blasphemy, so they attempted to stone Jesus to death right there, but he escaped from them, not because he was trying to avoid death, but this was not the right time and place.

And these verses, which we are considering today, occur in the middle of that, after Jesus declares himself to be the light of the world, and after he predicts his crucifixion, but before he accuses those who disbelieve of being children of the devil, and before they attempt to stone him.

While Jesus spoke, many believed in him. "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (8:31-32).

What does it mean to abide? We don't use that word a lot in common speech. The meaning is similar to "remain," "live," or "dwell." But it's stronger in some way. It's more intimate, committed, and permanent. You might live or dwell in one place for a while, but then move somewhere else. To abide means that we do not move. Marriage is a helpful picture of it. Husband and wife abide with one another, and they do not leave. And it's not merely that they refrain from leaving, but the focus is on the positive. They grow in this abiding with one another. To abide in Jesus' Word means that we recognize it as the place for us. We are planted there, like a tree beside streams of water (Ps. 1:3). And we don't merely say, "I guess I should stay here," but we grow in that place. It's our home.

In this way, we are truly Jesus' disciples. A disciple is a learner. It means that we remain and learn from Jesus.

Jesus promises that, by learning from him, we "will know the truth." There's a double meaning here. There is truth with a small "t" and Truth with a capital "T." Truth with a small "t" includes all the facts we learn from the Scriptures regarding God, ourselves, and this creation. Truth with a capital "T" is Jesus himself. Later in the Gospel of John, he says, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (14:6). It means that Jesus is the source of truth. Everything he says is true. But it's more than that. He is the standard of truth, and all truth comes from him. So when Jesus says, "You will know the truth," it means that we will know the truth about him, but not in an impersonal way, because we will know *him*.

Then the great promise is, "The truth will set you free." Sometimes people quote this as a proverb, like when a pastor or friend tries to convince someone to confess their sins, or when a detective is trying to get someone to tell the truth. And there's some truth to that. When we conceal our transgressions, or when we hide the truth about something, we create a prison for ourselves. But that's not really what Jesus is talking about. He means that the truth revealed in his Word will bring us freedom. And he especially means that he will set us free. When we abide in Jesus' Word, we will know Jesus, and he will set us free.

The Jews did not receive this well. Even those who believed in Jesus said, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" (8:33). This does not mean that they suddenly turned on Jesus, going from believers to unbelievers. But they struggled with this. And when we struggle with something, we should also ask questions about it, so that we can find the answers. They claimed that, as offspring of Abraham, they have never been enslaved. If you know even a little about the history of Israel, you will know that's not true. They were slaves in Egypt before the LORD led them out and planted them in the land of Canaan. And throughout their history in the Old Testament, other nations took them captive or forced them to pay tribute. During the time of Jesus, they were under the occupation of Rome and paid taxes to Rome. It's unlikely that these Jews completely forgot their own history, including their present. More likely, their argument is that, because they

are children of Abraham, they have the blessing of God and are truly free, even when other nations take them captive or oppress them. They were speaking more of a spiritual freedom than a political one, and spiritual freedom is greater than political freedom, because it means that a person will live in God's Kingdom forever.

But Jesus teaches them that it is not their physical descendency from Abraham that makes them free children of God, but the Son of God will set them free. Jesus is the only one who can give true freedom.

So it is necessary for us to understand what we are enslaved to. Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (8:34). This is why, when we talk about Christian freedom, that the believer is free from the Law, we do not mean that we are free to continue in sin, taking the grace of God for granted. To continue in sin, after we have been freed from the condemnation of the Law, is to go right back to the thing that once enslaved us. Sin feels like freedom. It's us following our desires to do what we want. The devil tempts us to think that will feel like freedom. But it's slavery to our passions. It's giving in to evil. We may feel that moral freedom is the right to create our own morals do whatever we want. But that is slavery. That person exercises moral freedom who has the self-discipline to do what is right in spite of their passions. When we give in to our passions, we are returning to slavery.

So we might think, *Okay, in order to be free, I should just stop sinning*. Give it a shot. See if it works. You will probably find that it does not work, because you and I do not have the moral strength. We make resolutions to be better. Then we fail. And maybe we really commit ourselves to changing. And we fail again. And we always think that the problem is that we just didn't commit ourselves enough. We think we can do better. But we keep failing. And that's when we really learn the depravity of our sin. When we were content in our sin, and we weren't fighting against it, we could deceive ourselves into thinking that we could be better, if we wanted to. But the moment we actually try is when we learn how deeply sin is embedded in our hearts. It's kind of like the addict who says, "I can quit anytime I want." To that, we should simply say, "Prove it." And if he can, great. But if he cannot, he's an addict, and he learns this about himself. He learns that he is powerless. Think of sin as an addiction, except, it is stronger than any other addiction. It is not our nature, but it has corrupted our nature to its core. When we try to quit, and I mean when we really investigate ourselves, not just our actions, but also our words and our thoughts, we see how deeply sin is embedded in our hearts. Perhaps, if you try really hard and take a lot of pride in your effort, you can break a sinful habit. But it never fails, we fall for some other temptation. Or perhaps pride becomes the sin that takes the other sin's place. And the devil manages to slip a different sin in without us noticing. And claiming outward mastery over one sin is a far cry from mastery over all sin.

So when Jesus says, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin," he does not imply that we can free ourselves by resolving to quit. He knows and reveals that he is the only one who can free us. So he says, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." That is the only way, and it is certain.

Jesus frees you from sin by taking it from you, suffering the punishment of death, which you deserve, in order to atone for that sin, and rising from the dead to give you new life. He frees you by forgiving your sins.

And mark that well. He does not free us from sin by turning off our sinful natures or injecting us with power to conquer our sins. If that were the case, it would still be up to us, so the results would be uncertain, and he could not say, "You will be free indeed." The only way Jesus can

say, "You will be free indeed," is if he covers all your sin. And so he does. He took all your sin, paid for it, and this is how you are saved.

During the Reformation of the 16th century, our Lutheran fathers said it this way,

> "Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4)" (*Augsburg Confession*, "Article IV: Justification").

Do not depend on yourself. That is slavery, because it binds you to the consequences of your own actions. But trust in Christ. That is true freedom, because belonging to Jesus binds you to the consequences of his actions. There is nothing better than to be bound to his death and resurrection, because his death forgives sins, and his resurrection brings life. "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.