

Sermon Reading: John 8:31-36

³¹ *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

³³ *They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”*

³⁴ *Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Sermon Theme: Set Free Indeed!

It seemed like Scotland’s revolution against England was all but lost. In an ambush their leader William Wallace was caught, thrown into the dungeon, and sentenced to death for treason. As they tie him to the rack to make his death as torturous as possible, he has a chance to make it all end. All William has to do is ask for mercy. The entire crowd is pleading with him, just say the word. It’s almost unbearable to watch as he writhes in pain and agony. Finally, you can tell he is trying to speak. Quiet is called as all are hoping the torture will end. You could hear a pin drop when: “Freedom!” William Wallace cries out. Chills. Even in death he would not surrender.

If you’ve ever watched the movie, *Braveheart*, you know I didn’t do the scene justice. Historical inaccuracies and artistic freedom to the side, the director knew how to grab American’s attention (and their money in the box-office). We who bleed red, white, and blue love our freedom. From the bald eagle effortlessly soaring through the air to the rocket’s red glare and fireworks bursting in air, we like to think we know a thing or two about freedom. And we will not tolerate it if anyone tries to take any of my freedom away. We live in the land of the free and the home of the brave!

So why do I feel so trapped? Why does my life feel so tied down? Why, when I look at my life, do I feel so not free?

Like us, the Jews in Jesus’ day thought they knew about freedom. Which may be surprising, especially when looking at their political status. At the time they are under Roman rule. Then you look through Israel’s history and it’s almost more common to see them under the rule of another nation rather than ruling themselves. Oh, yeah, don’t forget the 400 years they spent in literal slavery in Egypt. But these Jews insist, “We have never been slaves of anyone!” How?

For the Jews, it all rests on Father Abraham. God had chosen Abraham and his descendants to be His people. For them, it did not matter, so-to-speak, who the ruler was because they were still God’s chosen people. That meant life on earth and Heaven was already their freedom to enjoy. It was the non-Jews, all those not from the line of

Abraham, who were really slaves. The Jews' lives, their identity, their eternal life, their freedom was built on this foundation of being descendants of Abraham.

This shouldn't shock us. Whether it's freedom from expectations, responsibilities, and the never ending to-do list of life or it is the freedom from an aching conscience because of what we have or have not done, we try so hard to find ways to make ourselves free.

Like those Jews, we have a certain pride when it comes to our heritage coming from a hard working community that will keep on fighting no matter what happens. We have a certain pride because we are Lutheran knowing we are not saved by works, but faith, grace, Jesus alone! I don't know how many times I have heard, "We are simple, hard-working people," as if being a hard-worker frees you from certain actions. Or, "Don't worry pastor, they're good Lutherans." Or, "I went to Zion Lutheran School and was confirmed, you don't need to be concerned about me." Or, "Their family has always been members." As if being a Lutheran, going to Zion school, being a member gives you a free pass for certain life choices.

That's just one of the many ways we try to free ourselves. Others tell themselves they just need to work harder and be busier, then they will feel free. Another might think if we keep certain people happy, then we will be free. One parent finds freedom in making sure the kids have all the experiences they missed out in their youth. Another parent finds freedom in getting away for a little while. One person wants to believe that if I do enough nice things, volunteer in these areas, put my name down, then at least I will be free from people expecting more from me. Another hopes that if I accomplish certain life goals or finish these tasks, then I will be free.

But you know how well that works. There's always more work to do. Even when you try your hardest you can't make everyone happy. The experiences and personal time is great. But then you feel yourself being pulled in all these different directions. Instead of freeing yourself, you feel more tied down and burdened.

So you start listening to the world around you; maybe they have it figured out. You hear the promise: "The key is to stop saying "no" to yourself and don't say "no" to someone else's decisions they made for themselves. This way you are not putting shame on yourself and others won't be burdened either. Better to do what you want and what you see fit. That's freedom." And what happens? It works, for a while. You feel free not resisting anymore. You are not as uptight because you threw off this great heavy burden. But like waking up from a dream, life comes back. St. Augustine used the illustration of a fish set free from the boundaries of the water and is thrown on land. But the fish has not be set free to live in the bigger world than the pond. The fish is destroyed because now it lives contrary to its design. Freedom to do whatever you want does not set you free. The responsibilities are still are very real. The expectations are

still present. Instead of freeing you, you are now enslaved. You can't get yourself out. Whatever you used to escape, to numb your mind, to get away maybe even made things worse.

How are you trying to set yourself free in your life? Is it by trying to be the best person you can be? Is it by giving so many dollars in the offering plate? Are you trying to free yourself by ignoring a sin in your life convincing yourself it's not that bad? Are you trying to free yourself by ignoring the sin of your brother or sister in Christ? Do you think you are free because you are a pretty good person? Those are the half-truths the world wants you to believe. They are empty-promises you might tell yourself. They are lies the devil himself will try to convince you to be true.

Jesus sets the record straight: **“Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”** With one line Jesus wipes out any ideas of being free on your own. A slave cannot free themselves. Even if they run away, it does not change their status as slave. Sin once and you are a slave to sin. You feel that with the pet sin where no matter how many promises you make, how hard you try, or how determined you may be, it won't go away. Sickeningly you find yourself all too often crawling back again. But it's not just the pet sin. You feel it and struggle against it in your day-to-day life. You feel the chain weighing down because you should have known better, you shouldn't have done it. But you did. Or you didn't. And no amount of “but's”, “What you need to understand's”, or “if-only's” can set you free from your action or lack-of one.

We can scream and shout as loud as we want that it's not fair. We cry out in despair that we don't deserve it. But God's Law stands. Eventually you will have to be silent. The simple fact is you, me, and all people of all time and every age of life are held accountable before God. If you weren't, you would not die. So not only were we slaves to sin, but slaves to death. And all who sinned, who are slaves to sin, are not part of God's family and will not be welcomed into God's heavenly home.

Then here comes one who is really free. He's not a slave living in the house. He's the Son; God's only-begotten Son. True God from the beginning born of the Virgin Mary. He is tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he does not sin. He's free. He has flesh and blood, just like we do. He shares in our humanity, just like we have, but he's free. And he comes, Son of Man and Son of God not to be served but to serve in the place of slaves of sin like you and me who cannot free themselves. He comes to live and to give his life as the ransom payment for many. So God presents his own Son as the sacrifice to make us at one with him. With the shedding of Jesus' blood he pays the price to set you free. He washes your scarlet red sins and makes you white as wool. With his perfect life and innocent death Jesus declares you, “Not guilty!” Not because of something you could or would or might do. He gives it to you freely. You are justified through faith

that the Spirit works in your heart. Faith that believes when Jesus says, “It is finished,” there’s nothing more that we have to do. He did it all. The Son sets you free!

All this Jesus does so that you would be his own and live freely in his family. He tells you, “Stop trying to free yourself. I already freed you! Stop trying to be a better Christian. You are already perfect in God’s sight. Stop trying to find your answers and freedom from the world around you. Stop listening to the lies of the devil and yourself. Listen to me! Remain in my Word; that’s where I speak to you. That’s where you will find the truth and that truth sets you free. It’s there where I show you that your sins are forgiven and assure you that guilt has been taken from you. It’s with my Word where you see in your Baptism you died to sin so that it does not control you or your life. No, you are free! It’s my Word that gives you to eat and to drink in my Holy Supper the very thing I sacrificed for you on the cross: my body and blood given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. I set you free so that you are already part of God’s family. As part of the family you have a home waiting for you that I prepared for you. Set free from sin means you are free from the curse of sin death. Death is my servant I use to welcome my family home to heaven.”

Because the end is guaranteed it shapes your life today. Being free in Jesus means you are truly free in your daily life. The expectations of others and responsibilities of life are now opportunities God gives you to serve your neighbor and share Jesus’ love. When life is hard and it’s a struggle we know we aren’t chained to right now, we are set free in Jesus. And how do we know this? How can we be sure? It’s not because you are Lutheran. It’s not because you are a member at a certain church. It’s not because you are a good person. Remaining in Jesus’ Word, Jesus sets you free and gives you confidence. He frees me from myself, my doubts, and my sins. And when the devil, the world, or your conscience tries to convince you otherwise you tell him, “Liar. I am God’s child freed by his Son Jesus. I am free indeed.” Amen.