

November 3, 2019  
Reformation Sunday  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church  
**Welcome Home: Where You Are Free to Be Yourself**

**John 8:31–36 (NIV84)**

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

*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?”*

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The little goldfish swims from one end to the other in the aquarium. That little fish is a prisoner. Glass walls surround it. There is no way out, no freedom. Sure, there is food that magically drops into the tank regularly. The water is cleaned and is a good temperature. But isn’t it cruel to keep that fish from the freedom it deserves? Of course, if you take it out of the tank and put it on the table, it will soon die. Either the cat will get it or the lack of water will. Maybe you could put it in the local stream where it could make a tasty snack for a bird. Or maybe release it from its glass prison and put it in a pond where a hungry bass swallows it.

Maybe that goldfish has more freedom in the tank than outside of it. Inside, it is free to live (as long as the human takes care of it!). Outside it is free to die from many dangers. Last week we marveled at how Jesus brought us into God’s family and calls us his brothers and sisters. But our sinful nature sees being part of God’s family like being in that aquarium. Being in God’s family restricts our freedom. Following Jesus’ teachings keeps us from doing what we want, when we want and where we want. So our sinful nature would like to be free from God and his Word. But that is false freedom. It is instead slavery to sin and leads to eternal death. True freedom is being able to do what God wants us to do as children of God. He welcomes us home into his family and there we are free to be ourselves – children of God.

**Free From Sin**

*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?” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”*

The Jews to whom Jesus was talking did not think they were slaves and probably did not think their sin was serious either. Of course, they seem to have forgotten the history of the Jewish people. The Jews were slaves to almost every nation of the Middle East. They were slaves in Egypt, exiles in Babylon, under the control of Persia, conquered by the Greeks, and they are currently under the mighty Roman Empire. Politically and nationally, they have not been free for many centuries. But maybe the Jews talking with Jesus were only talking about spiritual freedom. They were wrong in that case too. For everyone who sins is a slave to sin and they were still slaves to sin even if ignorantly.

Are you a slave to sin? If we sin, then part of us is still a slave to sin. Maybe we can recognize the control our sinful nature has when we think, “I couldn’t help it” or “I couldn’t stop those wicked words” or “I had no control over my anger.” Our sinful nature is a complete slave to temptation and sin. When tempted to tear someone down with words, our sinful nature puts up no resistance. When tempted to lie or cheat or slander or be immoral in any way, our sinful nature is all for it. We must not be like the people Jesus talked to and deny that we are slaves to sin. Instead we see our slavery, freely confess it and go to our Lord for help and forgiveness.

Just over 500 years ago, Martin Luther was keenly aware of his sin. From the time he entered the monastery, he dedicated his time to doing everything possible to make up for his sin. He made every effort to keep himself from sin. But he was losing the battle with sin and temptation. He hated sin but sin was still his master. For no matter what he did, it was never enough. No matter how much he punished himself and denied himself, he could never throw off the shackles of sin. And turning to Jesus for help was not helping. For Luther had been taught that Christ was the new law giver. The law of Moses was only the basics. Christ came to give a deeper law to follow. Remember how Christ told the people things like: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”<sup>1</sup> It is not just the outward action of murder but the evil thought of anger that is sin.

So when Luther looks at Jesus he sees the God who will not only condemn him for his outward sins and actions but also for his anger and hatred and every other sinful thought. He could only see Jesus as a righteous judge who will condemn Luther to hell. But Luther did not know the truth about Jesus. He saw only a distorted, partial view of Christ. Jesus did not come to make the law more difficult. The law is already an impossible task master. Instead...

*Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

Jesus came to set sinners free by the truth. The truth is that Christ came to fulfill the law for us. He came to keep every commandment both outwardly and inwardly. He came to give us true freedom. Christ did not come to demand righteousness but to give his righteousness to sinners. Christ not only lived free from sin to free us from sin, but he also paid the price for our sin to free us from eternal death. The ransom price had to be paid to free us from slavery to sin. Jesus paid it all by his suffering and death. As the Son of God, he was never a slave to sin and therefore could freely offer his life as payment to free us. As the Son of God, his payment and only his payment is enough to pay the full ransom. We can be sure that we are free because if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!

### **Free to Be a Child of God**

However, we are not free to be whatever we want to be. We are free to be who Christ made us to be—children of God. So what does it look like to live as a free child of God?

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

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1 (Mt 5:21–22)

We are free to hold to Jesus' teachings. We are free to follow God's rules. Now, to our American minds, this is not freedom. To most people, freedom is to be able to do whatever you want, with no restrictions. God places lots of restrictions on his family. To our sinful nature, it looks like God has trapped us in an aquarium with all his laws. God tells us not to get drunk, not to commit adultery, not to curse or swear or use obscene language. Well, that is the content of lots of movies and television shows and the way the world entertains itself. God tells us not to love money, to give away what we have earned to help others, and to be content with what you have. But the world keeps score by money and material things. God's rules are keeping us from winning in the eyes of the world. Our sinful nature always sees God's law as a barrier to freedom, as something to find a way over, around or under.

But the truth sets us free from this way of thinking. For Christ has forgiven our sins. The law that condemns our sins, condemned Jesus in our place. And while the law continues to show us our sin, we can also see how the teachings of Jesus, the law of God, makes us free to live. For God gives his law to protect his people.

God told his people this before issuing the Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). The God who saved them now gives them commandments to also protect them and keep them as his people. The God who saved us in Christ also protects us through the teachings of Christ. Someone who loves money may end up with millions or end up with nothing but either way they will lose Jesus and eternal life by focusing their life on money. The person who joins in the immorality of the world may have friends in this world and seem to have fun but may lose out on eternal friends in the eternal joys of heaven. You see, all those rules Jesus gives us are to protect us from sin and eternal death. He wants to keep us free to live instead of throwing us out of the aquarium to be free to die.

Of course, there are times we let our sinful nature take control again and we try to crash through the walls of God's law. We jump out of the aquarium just to see what it is like outside of God's rules. It is at these times that we need the truth of Christ's teachings more than ever. For Christ came as the physician to heal those sick with sin. Christ came as the Good Shepherd to find the lost sheep. Christ came to release the captives and to destroy the work of the devil. Christ came to remove the sting of death and give us life everlasting. Christ did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. He came to free us from sin and free us to live for him now and with him eternally.

*So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Amen.