

John 8:31-36

We have a hard time understanding, really comprehending, what it means to be a slave. You and I have never been enslaved to another human being. Now children may object to this statement, saying, "You don't know my mom and dad; they treat me like a slave around the house!" Employees may say the same thing about their boss; even a few husbands about their wife (although I would never say that). But if we take the time to sit down and read a book about the horrors many slaves endured, or watch a documentary showing the harsh brutality by some slave-owners, we would readily admit that we cannot imagine living that kind of a life. Just to be a slave is bad enough...to have no freedom, to be owned like a piece of property. But to be enslaved by a heartless, cruel master--that is beyond our comprehension.

There is something worse, however, than being a slave. And that is this...to be a slave, but to live in denial of it. "We...have never been enslaved to anyone," the Jews told Jesus in our text. Were they kidding? Had they forgotten about Tiberius over in Rome who happened to be the Caesar? Their lives were under his control. Had they forgotten their history books, or perhaps rewritten them in their own minds? They had been slaves to the cruel Babylonians for seventy years, and before that slaves to the Pharaoh down in Egypt. But Jesus does not give them a history lesson. He points to something far worse than physical slavery...spiritual slavery. "Everyone who commits sin," He says, "is a slave to sin."

And here is where we come in. We do not share, with the Jews, their history of slavery. But we do share with them the spiritual slavery to sin. And even more, we share their denials as well. We do not think of ourselves as slaves. We pride ourselves on our independence, and not just as Americans; as Christians, too. We like to think that we can handle the problems that come into our life; even the spiritual problems. We think the biggest problems which face our congregation all have to do with money. So if we all just buckle down and give more, or have more fund-raisers, we can fix our congregation's problems. We think our own, and our family's troubles, can be solved if we do the best we can and all try harder to work things out. We are simply not willing to admit that our troubles have enslaved us. And worse, that our troubles for the most part, are a result of our own sinfulness.

Like the Jews, we live in denial. They claimed Abraham as their father, and so how could they be called slaves? For us, it's Martin Luther. "Me, a slave to sin? But I'm a Lutheran. I'm no slave." Yet even Martin Luther himself recognized, not just that he was a slave, but that his master was a cruel tyrant. He echoed the words of the Apostle Paul: "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?" (Rom. 7)

Rather than live in denial, we need to face up to the harsh reality that we who commit sin are slaves to sin. Our selfishness enslaves us. So does our sinful pride. We become slaves to our anger, slaves to sexual lust, slaves to money and what money can buy. To live in denial of that which enslaves us is to be unprepared for the coming Judgment. "The slave does not remain in the house forever," says Jesus. "Those who live according to the flesh will die." God's Word is clear. To deny the truth that our sins have enslaved us is to live in death, for that one has no place with God in His eternal House.

If we are willing, by the grace of God, to come out of our denial and confess the truth, then for us there is sweet comfort in the words of Jesus. "If the Son sets you free," He says, "you will be free indeed." This is not just sentimental, feel-good, positive thinking. This is our only hope. If anyone is to be set free from the slavery to sin and death, that freedom will come only through Jesus Christ.

Read Martin Luther and you will find that he gives all glory to Christ; that he, on his own, had nothing to do with his release from bondage. It is Christ who set me free, he confesses with joy. The Reformation speaks of this truth: Grace alone, Faith alone, Christ alone. The shackles around Luther's mind, heart, and soul were loosened and fell to the floor as he read in the Scriptures that we are saved, not by our efforts, but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

No slave can free himself. A slave must be set free by his master. And because sin was our master, Jesus became sin for you. He allowed sin to enslave Him. And not just sin in general--your sin, my sin. That which was your master, mastered Jesus on the cross. He surrendered to sin's power. He gave Himself up, and sin claimed Him completely. It worked Him over. It was a brutal tyrant. The punishments Jesus endured from His Father for becoming the sinner in your place were far more brutal than any slave has ever endured. And then sin, as His cruel master, carried Jesus away in death.

But on the third day the bonds of death were shattered. The stone was ejected from the tomb. Jesus came forth alive. And He who lives is the One who draws you to Himself. In Baptism he claims you. In the Holy Supper He draws near to you. Here in His Divine Service He speaks His words into you. And so He who now has power over sin, death, and hell turns the key in your life and sets you free, free indeed.

It doesn't matter if you feel like a slave. Jesus has set you free. No sin in your life as the power to master you. Jesus' words are more powerful than any sin in your heart and mind, any sin that plagues you from your past. And His words are for you--for every one of you--"I forgive you," He says, "of all your sins." And because we are weak in the flesh and so often allow sin to master us, today He gives you His body and blood in the Sacrament to enable you to live, not as slaves to sin, but in the freedom of His forgiveness.

Jesus' words in our text are very personal to me. When I was thirteen years old kneeling before the altar of God, these words were given to me for my confirmation verse: "If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Jesus did not say, "If you are acquainted with My Word..." He says, "If you continue in My Word; if you abide in it" Looking back, I have to say that as a teenager entering into high school, and then as a young man entering into college, I could have done better with abiding in the Word of Christ. I thought I was doing fine, but it was more of being acquainted with it than truly abiding in it. To abide means to live--to live in the Word of God. To make it our home, our dwelling place.

When I was thirteen, my dad was my pastor, but he did not give me my confirmation verse. Another pastor did, because my dad died of cancer a few months before I was confirmed. But my dad gave me something better. In the months before he died, he was in his easy chair for hours on end day after day doing one thing--reading his Bible. The closer death came, the more he was in the Word. Looking back, I see now that my dad gave me a wonderful confirmation gift--he showed me how to abide in Jesus' Word.

Friend, Jesus gives that same Word to you. It is the power over sin in your life. It is the truth which sets you free. A slave who has been set free does not want to fall back into slavery. And this will not happen to you as you abide in the Word of Christ. "Lord," we pray, "keep us steadfast in Your Word!" Amen.