



Bishop Amy Odgren's sermon Synod Assembly 2023

A reading from the gospel of John, the 8th chapter 8:31-36

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been

slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?"



³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if **the Son makes you free**, you will be free indeed.

Dear friends in Christ, grace, peace, and mercy are yours through our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For those of you who are gathered together at Cragun's Resort this weekend, we have had rich and vibrant conversations regarding the four core values that guide us as the Northeastern Minnesota Synod – And if you are joining us for worship either through the livestream link or while worshipping in your own settings this morning, it is good to have you join us. I want you all to know that we are a synod that is striving to be **Welcoming, Connecting, Reforming, and Supporting**, so congregations and ministries are empowered to encounter and share the love of God in Christ Jesus. These four values are what we have been gathered around at this year's Synod Assembly, while uniting under the theme "The Son Makes You Free!"

We just heard a passage from the gospel of John that notes Jesus' words that "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And again, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

What is this truth that makes us free?

Is this the truth which we will discover more deeply as we continue in his word? Yes, in many ways, I expect this is precisely the truth of which he speaks: We are human. We are limited. We are not God. Only God is God. And acknowledging these truths allows us to more faithfully live the lives God calls us to live.

- Perhaps we experience this as freedom as it helps us to realign our priorities, our values, our dreams.
- Maybe this offers freedom from worry about those things which, in the end, really won't matter.
- Possibly this enables us to freely live our lives in grace knowing that in our human limits, failure will always be part of our lives --- in the same way it will be with our neighbors --- and that forgiveness is perhaps the most freeing thing we can offer or receive.

- And yes, perhaps this frees us finally to be fully human in the best sense of what it is to be human.

There comes a tipping point in lives and stories when what we hide from ourselves becomes bare. There comes a time when the impact of the secret long suppressed becomes a weight so burdensome that it must come out. There comes a dark moment in time when slavery, when bondage must be recognized and spoken about. Until this point, freedom is not possible.

For Scrooge, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, that point is the culmination of a journey through Christmases past, present and future where, with the clarity of voice that only a ghost-like presence can provide. Ebenezer hears that his future is short in this life and weighed down with many chains of the bondage of his own bitterness and greed in the next. We see his chains, in the story, quite literally, and know with him that in order to break that bondage, a new life, a new way of living is required.

With his great speech on the steps of a great monument, in front of a crowd of marchers, we heard Martin Luther King, Jr. speak the words of the bitterness of bondage that, despite the freedom that was proclaimed 100 years earlier for African American slaves, it still existed and continues in all corners of our nation. We are forced to look, as a nation, and discover that the bondage of **some** is the bondage **of us all**. We are forced to see that in order to break that bondage, a new life, a new way of living is required.

We saw and continue to see in the scenes of global catastrophic weather events, whether it's hurricanes, typhoons, drought, earthquakes, fires, or floods that effect food security - there is a significant population that lives mostly ignored by the polite society of our country. This population knows no barriers of race or creed. It is simply the poor and dispossessed, condemned to live without resources like reliable transportation and even houses that many of us take for granted. We discover the economic bondage that seems to be a reality, certainly, but also a bondage of a different sort.

A bondage of blame and righteous accusation that echoes down through the corridors of this proud but humbled nation. I am speaking specifically about those who want to see, in such events, the hand of an angry vengeful God, dealing out punishment to who they name as "the wicked and the ungodly – the other". They proclaim a modern event like the flood of Noah, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. They too warn of a needed change of life, a new way of living. But they do not recognize that they approach the attitude and the danger of the descendants of Abraham who protest being called slaves and bristle at the claims Jesus makes to the contrary. I am aware that in order to break this bondage, new life, a new way of living is required.

While the intention to affect a turn-around in the lives of the people of the world may be good, the result is not always positive. The main problem is that most of us are in favor of a turn-around, a reformation, for **other** people, but not for ourselves.

Pointing fingers and stating that we know how to fix other people is not only arrogant and emotionally traumatic for others, but detrimental for everyone.

Jesus tells his followers, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Our bondage is in our propensity to refuse to live as God has created us - for the sake of the beloved other. Our bondage is that, in the face of death, we try to grab and control life for our own sakes rather than others. Our bondage is pervasive, and includes a whole world, perhaps even a whole cosmos. So that the ability to point out others' faults, others' bondage and not look our own in the face is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Perhaps we need to be confronted with the notion, made humorous by Walt Kelley's *Pogo* cartoon many years ago. "*We have met the enemy, and he is us.*" Only when we see how deeply we participate in the bondage, only when we see that there is no amount of new life creation that we can do to get ourselves out of the bondage, only when we sink to the depths of our existence can we even begin to let go of ourselves and then, finally, God's Spirit will begin to dawn on us.

God's way of overcoming our bondage is by entering into it. God endures the alienation, the suffering, even the death that are the marks of our bondage. In Jesus Christ, the son, we are set free from bondage because it can no longer separate us from God and each other. More than that, by going through the depths of our bondage Jesus emerges on the other side, truly a new creation. He teaches and lives in such a way as to invite us, embolden us, and lead us through death to life.

And now comes the surprising realization that the God of the cross, the Christ of the cross is not in global disasters in a vengeful way, but rather the God of the cross is in them in a redemptive way. And we dare not use these events for our own purposes, but rather place ourselves in the center of the suffering and live God's future into the present, proclaiming freedom from bondage for all.

The freedom that God gives, connecting us to a future that is not yet, but becomes possible for us to see and experience, does indeed set us free in the here and now. Scrooge is liberated from his chains by the very dreams that depict them. By staring one future clearly in the face, he is able to live into another life into a much different future.

So, we too, are liberated by the experience of seeing our bondage clearly and also seeing and tasting, if only in part, the future God has in store for us. We are not only aware that our ultimate destiny has been altered by the gift of God's grace, but we are also aware that we can experience that destiny, that future in the here and now because we have been freed for life in the present. The tipping point in our lives is Jesus Christ, who lives with us in our bondage and leads us to freedom in the love of God.

This freedom is not only freed from sin, death, and the power over evil in our world. That is a wonderful gift, but it is only the start of what God is doing. We are also freed for a life lived for others – for neighbors near and far. This freedom opens to us the tremendous possibilities of God's future.

It allows us to see that God's vision is no more and no less than the reformation, the re-creation of the entire cosmos. And we see that we are both the objects and the agents of God's continuing work in the world. And even if we cannot fully experience the results in the here and now, we are given courage to be witnesses, to be prophets of that time to come.

Just such a prophet and witness was Martin Luther, who saw the bondage and the freedom of the world in radically new ways, informed by God's grace. Though he did not know, nor would he anticipate the scope of the reform movement he started over five-hundred years ago, he did have the vision and the courage to act and speak in concert with God's vision. In the process, not only his life, but the course of human history was changed forever.

So too, was Martin Luther King, Jr. when he spoke in Washington nearly 60 years ago that he would not see the progress that was sure to come as our nation faced its legacy of bondage and began the slow hard road to the reconciliation of our current reality with the founding ideals of liberty and justice for all people. But he could see that the day was coming; he put the vision in front of the people so that they could see it too. He spoke in concert with Jesus Christ, who sets all of us free.

And it is the vision of the crucified and risen Christ, focused on God's future rather than on the hiding and denying of bondage to sin that frees us. It is a vision that allows us to face with courage and truth the reality of our sin and know that we are loved and redeemed beyond its power. It is that vision that helps us to sing clearly of God's love and the freedom from bondage that comes only from God's gracious gift of the Son.

Jesus speaks to us today of truth. And of slavery to sin. And of his being our freedom as he both models and grants this unfathomable acceptance. And we know in our gut, don't you think, as well as in our experience that truth sets us free? But first it must be spoken, received, and embraced. Or so it seems to me. First, we have to acknowledge our utter slavery to that which binds us up. And our need to be set free. And that we have nowhere to turn but to the only one who can bring this marvelous gift of freedom to us.

This is the wonder of Jesus' words for us today and every day. It's not up to me or you. You and I are to simply stand still in the unparalleled gift that as broken and hurting and yes, hurtful, too, as we are -- - Jesus came to set us free. We can't do it. All we can do --- all we have to do --- is know our need and be grateful in the gift. All we have to do is cast aside the biggest lie of all: that we can do it all ourselves and that our value rests in that. It does not. And sometimes coming to that larger truth begins in simply speaking what truths we know here and now as best we can. Even or especially about ourselves. It all starts with truth, of course. This is the truth of our humanness and the greater truth of God's great love for all of us.

People of God – friends in Christ – Northeastern Minnesota Synod - *“So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”* The Son Makes You Free! Thanks be to God! Amen.