

**“Perfectly Free”**  
**Reformation Sunday**  
**A Sermon Preached by**  
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Scripture: 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.

- One of my best part time jobs while studying at U of T for the ministry was a Research Assistant position working for one of Canada’s finest Church Historians Phyllis Airhart. I would spend my days in the archives, up the tower in Robarts library and regularly I would walk across campus to Dr. Airhart’s office at Victoria University, across the street from the law school and the ROM. If it was a beautiful summer day I would sit outside of the old red stone Victoria College and eat my lunch, admiring the architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian university build by Upper Canada’s Methodists. Above the giant entrance way is carved in the stone, “The TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE.”

- As I would sit eating my sandwich and admiring the old stone college building I also loved eavesdropping on conversations around me. I was not alone in sitting and having my lunch and admiring the old building. Once I heard a couple of undergrad philosophy students remark, “Ah yes, good advice from Plato.” “No, no,” rebuked the other, “that’s Socrates.” Another day an anarchist looking young man was trying to impress his girlfriend sitting beside him and he said, “The Truth Shall Make You Free...that’s Karl Marx.”
- And so it went, one day a political science student attributed it within earshot to Sir John A. MacDonald – who was a good Presbyterian – a pillar of the church – a supporter from the outside. Another student in the sciences told a friend it was a quote from Sir Isaac Newton...and on and on.
- How fascinating that a direct teaching from Jesus could be so easily forgotten...

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- Well, getting lost and forgetting who we are seems to be a human trait in a fallen world.
- “the truth will set you free” is not an affirmation of personal independence or autonomy. In context, what is in view is the idea of faith as a continuing relationship.
- This story comes at an interesting point in John’s gospel. John’s gospel begins with the “prologue” that we like to read on Christmas Eve, John the Baptist in the south along the border with Jordan, the call of the first disciples, up to Galilee where he turns Water into Wine in Cana, down to Jerusalem for his temple tantrum (it happens earlier in John’s gospel than the synoptics), Judean countryside and then up through Samaria with the famous Woman at the well story, he heads north to Galilee and heals a royal official’s Son, likely someone who worked for the dreaded King Herod, then he’s back down to Jerusalem for a healing at the sheep gate by the pools of Bethesda,

then up to the Galilee with the miracle of the five thousand fed, Jesus walks on water, and so on.

- John 8:31-36 draws us into an intense scene that is part of a much larger drama of increasing tension and opposition that runs from the beginning of chapter 7 to the end of chapter 8. To make sense of what's going on here it's helpful to keep in mind that the backdrop to all of it is the Festival of the Booths (or Tabernacles), the Jewish harvest celebration that commemorates God's protection and accompaniment of the Jews on their wilderness sojourn from the bondage of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land (Leviticus 23). To call it like our Thanksgiving is a stretch but it was a harvest festival. Participants in this Jerusalem Temple-based festival would often construct booths, draw water from the pool of Siloam, and light candles to commemorate the odyssey of their ancestors.
- It is in this context that we must hear Jesus' declaration that he offers anyone who is thirsty rivers of flowing water (7:37-39), that he is the light of the world (8:12-20), and that those who continue (Greek, *meno*, literally, abide, dwell, or tabernacle) in his Word will be truly set free. Jesus is the embodiment of the festival!
- Jesus' fame is growing and so are the numbers of his enemies. The religious establishment is threatened by Jesus teaching, and so they are looking for ways to get rid of him. Jesus begins by addressing those who are already following him, telling them that they can expect three things "IF" they keep following:
  - If you continue in my word, [then]:
  - you are truly my disciples
  - you will know the truth
  - the truth will make you free
- John Calvin in his commentary on this passage notes that the "if" language suggests staying power. Calvin uses the image of a race where some people

start but drop out, others tire part way but we must “persevere to the winning post.”

- A pretty straightforward teaching, Abide with Me, stick it out with me, don't give up on discipleship, Jesus says. Abide with me and you will be my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. All you need is me, Jesus says.
- But this is not the story they were raised with. People object saying, “Well, we do have Abraham as our ancestor.” We're good Jesus. We're free already. Which is a bit ironic since they say this under the oppression of Rome.
- Jesus launches in reminding them that the reality is they are living in a fallen world and a slave to sin. Someone needs to break them out of that sin. Someone needs to set them free.
- Sometimes people are fully aware of the power of sin in the world and in their lives. Those who are involved in addictions ministries know all about this. Of course, sometimes people are oblivious.
- \*\*\*STORY of the guy on the plane, “Somebody needs to save this guy from himself.”

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- There is a great emphasis on freedom and individuality in our western culture today. Even non-religious people will speak in terms of “free will.”
- Again, Calvin draws a distinction between the freedom Jesus is talking about here and what Calvin's enemies (he calls them papists) mean when they talk about free will. Free will is human freedom in general, the freedom John 8 talks about is the regeneration that comes from Jesus by faith. Calvin says it's not free will we focus on but Christ our liberator.”
- On Reformation Sunday we celebrate this freedom that Christ our Liberator gives us.
- 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation: Karl Barth - Not those who *repeat* the doctrine most faithfully, but those who *reflect* upon it most faithfully so that they can expound it as their own doctrine, are their most faithful pupils

- Church people can also misunderstand freedom as their free choice to be involved in a church.
- Attending church doesn't make a Christian anymore than standing in a garage makes you a car.
- And that's just it, isn't it. Sure, church people are guilty of feeling like as long as they are involved in church they're good.
- We may not say, "We have Abraham as our ancestor" but on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation there may be more than one sermon preached today around the world that essentially claims "We are the theological descendants of Martin Luther and John Calvin, and have never been slaves to anyone!"
- It's not about heritage it's about *relationship* with Jesus.
- That was at the heart of the Reformation movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There was plenty of heritage – 1200 years of Christendom at that point from 313 AD and Emperor Constantine's embrace or domestication of the church. What was missing was direct access to a life changing relationship with Jesus Christ.
- The freedom that Jesus speaks about in today's reading – if the son sets you free you will be free indeed. That's not freedom to go off and do whatever you like. No, Martin Luther had a clear sense of both the joy and duty of obedience to Christ that comes through discipleship. Luther summarized the Christian life as follows, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all."<sup>1</sup>

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- The truth that sets us free is not simply an intellectual argument – it's not actually so much about belief but trust. You can say that you believe in any number of things but trust is deeper. I can say that I believe that air travel is

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, *On Christian Liberty* with reference to Philippians 2.

safe but I show trust when I get on board and fly home this afternoon. I can say that I believe in the idea of marriage but I demonstrate trust when I enter into a relationship for life in a covenant of marriage.

- People will be aware, however, that in one sense, they are not completely free from sin. They continue in sin, as before. Perhaps as believers, they sin less than before they learned to live in close relationship to Jesus' words. But, sin is ever present in life...what makes the different is the cross and how Jesus invites us into the family of God.
- We can be freed *from* something, but we can also be freed *for* something. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36).

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- The Bible is clear that Jesus has saved us from Satan, from sin, from death. But what has Jesus saved us for?
- In his commentary on this passage John Calvin says, "For what Jesus has of His own nature He communicates to us by adoption, when we are engrafted by faith into His body and made His members.
- \*\*\*Son makes you free – story Baxter Kruger shared with me in Vancouver of the Dad on the couch surprised his son's friend joining in attacking him playfully as a ninja. Only through the invitation of the Son would the stranger engage playfully with the Father.
- We are included in the family of God, we are students of Jesus, enrolled of the school of Christ we call the church.
- We are apprenticed to, and adopted by, the Master Carpenter who rough-hewn cross has set us free from sin and death to live forever with him, in the family of God. Hallelujah. Hallelujah Hallelujah!