

“NO LONGER SLAVES: THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE GOSPEL”

Text: Jn 8:31-36 (Rom 3:19-28; Ps 46)

Jesus said: If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. And, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. So what is this freedom that we have in Christ? What does it look like? Some would liken that freedom to be a freedom from all restraint. A radical individuality which means that you can do whatever you want, live however you want, believe whatever you want, say whatever you want, and no one can tell you otherwise. Because you're free.

There are two problems with that. First, Jesus said that if you abide in my word, then you are free. And also: everyone who commits sin is a slave - to sin. So if in your freedom, in your individuality, you are going against the Word of God and sinning, you aren't free at all, but a slave to those sinful urges in you that are controlling you; that you are serving and satisfying and obeying. That's how many people today see their freedom: they're free to sin. Even Christians sometimes think this, because, after all, Jesus will forgive me. So I don't have to worry about how much I sin. St. Paul addresses that for us when he writes: "Should we continue in sin so that grace may abound? May it never be!"

Surely you realize that's not what Jesus meant here, and to think that way is damaging to yourself and others... and it has caused many to shipwreck their faith.

Luther rightly put it this way: A Christian is the freest lord of all, subject to none. And yet at the same time, A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Those two statements sound like they contradict each other, but they don't. They're both true. And they're both important and important to keep together, because the first without the second leads to license and the thinking that I can do whatever I want, even sin. But the second without the first leads to legalism and the thinking that my salvation depends on what I do, which was the problem in Luther's day, and yet, we see both of those things in our world and in some churches even today. But kept together, they perfectly describe what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel, and how we live our lives as Christians.

Because in Christ, abiding in Him and His Word, you are free...

- * Free from the guilt of your sin.
- * Free from having to earn your place in the kingdom of God.
- * Free from the condemnation and punishment and hell that your sins deserve.
- * Free from having to justify yourself. Free from the accusations of the evil one.
- * Free from the fear of death...

Because all your sin and guilt were put on Him on the cross. He wanted it! And so also He took the condemnation, punishment, and hell your sins deserved. He atoned for your

sin, died in your place, and then broke the bonds of the grave and set you free. He did it all, and so you are free. Justified. A child of God in Him. There is nothing for you to do for this. Nothing you can do. It is, as we heard Paul say in our Epistle, a gift. From Him to you. From His cross, through the word and water of Baptism, to you. A new you with a new life. The Son has set you free, and you are free indeed! 100%. Subject to none. You will live and reign with Him forever. As Jesus said from the cross: It is finished. That why today is a day to rejoice, with Aiden, Asher, and Charlotte in what God has done in making them his dear children through water and the Word and the freedom that is now theirs in Christ, even as we rejoice in our own Baptism.

But what now? Sin as much as you want? Indulge your every urge and desire? Of course not. The kingdom of God is not a kingdom of sin. To do that, as Jesus said, is returning to your slavery to sin. It's you being controlled and driven by your old, sinful man and not being the new man, the born from above person that you are—that Christ has made you.

Christ has set you free to not be a slave of sin. To be free not to serve yourself, but to serve your neighbor in love. As Christ did. As Christ loved you. Because the Son of God didn't have to come down from heaven, take your sins and the sins of the world on Himself, and die with them. But He did. In love. He was free from the Law but freely made Himself subject to the Law. He had no sin but took your sin. He was rich but made Himself poor. All for you. The God who is free to do anything, and who can do anything, did that! For you! To set you free.

This really is hard to believe... Because why would God do that for Luther? He was nothing but sin! Why would He do that for you? You're no prize! Why would He do that for me? Who continues to fall short and fail in so many ways? Why for the Pharisees who kept opposing Him, for the disciples who were so frustratingly slow to understand, for those who put Him on the cross? Because that's what love does. The God who is love.

And that love has been given to you, forgiving your sins, making you a child of God, giving you the promise of everlasting life. And as that love lives in you, it lives not according to your old, sinful man, but like Christ - giving itself in service to others. Loved ones, family, friends, neighbors, and enemies alike. Because Jesus, who did all for you, now says to you: Love one another as I have loved you.

And you can, because you're FREE in Christ. If you had to do something to save yourself, you couldn't serve your neighbor - you'd have to worry about you. In fact, all your life would revolve around taking care of you. But if you don't have to worry about you, you're FREE to worry about your neighbor and her needs. You are FREE to serve, forgive, help, and love them, putting their needs above your own, as Jesus did for you.

Not that it's easy! Faith isn't easy. But it is good. Because to live like this is to live the life for which you were created. The life God meant for you. It's Satan who doesn't want you to live that life, but to live for yourself, convincing you that that's the way to

happiness and fulfillment. Whatever you think is right, is right. Whatever you think is good, is good. Whatever you think is best, is best. Because Christ set you free, didn't He? Didn't He? So enjoy your freedom!

Here's an illustration I used with our catechumens just this past week: Imagine a goldfish in a glass bowl in the living room. He looks out of his bowl at all the people and he sees them able to freely move about the room and even move beyond the room to the whole house and even beyond to the outside world, and he longs for that kind of freedom.

And so he swims around and around the bowl until he gets up the momentum he needs to jump out... to what? ...freedom? No, death!

So also with us. What the devil calls freedom is really slavery. This shouldn't surprise us. The devil is a liar. And He lies when he tells you that living like Jesus says is really slavery! You have to do this, you have to do that, you don't get to do what you want to do, and God is a buzz-kill. You don't get to do what everyone else is doing. That's no good! But maybe it is good. Maybe what we want isn't good. Maybe my urges and desires are self-destructive and so to follow them... And so Satan drives people to despair and hopelessness. And then people dive into more sin, looking for something good. Or they give up.

And although we are his baptized and free children, we've fallen for Satan's lies...I know I have. We've lived as slaves and not in the freedom Christ won for us and has for us. But we don't despair or lose hope. We come here, and are set free again. The chains of sin are loosed with the Absolution, the joy of our freedom proclaimed in the Gospel, and as we're fed with Jesus Himself, the Bread of Life, to raise us and strengthen us to live in His freedom. Real freedom. The freedom to be the child of God you are.

And with that freedom comes peace and joy. Peace knowing that your present and your future are secure in Jesus, and so you really have nothing to worry about or fear. And joy that your life has more meaning than just serving yourself and trying to get as much as you can, as if the one who dies with the most toys wins. That's pretty empty and gets really old really fast. There must be more to life than that, many people hope. And there is when you're a child of God, and when you know the freedom of a Christian.

So if you're lacking peace and joy in your life, maybe you've been focused too inwardly—too individually.. Instead, look out. Outside yourself to God in faith, and to your neighbor in love. And you'll know that joy that Jesus Himself knew, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Cross and joy are two things that normally don't go together! But they do for Jesus, who was not looking inward, but outward. Who looked to His Father in faith, and toward you in love. And He was filled with joy, even was faced with the cross. And even on the cross, was able to die in peace.

Sound good? Sound like what you're looking for? Under the crosses you bear? Maybe we're thinking about it all wrong. Maybe our lack of peace and joy is from our slavery to sin and our own wishes and desires.

So instead, refocus. If you focus inward, your sight is all of out whack and you won't see properly. But focus outward, and you'll see clearly the love of God for you in Jesus and His cross, the victory that is yours in His resurrection, and indeed, all the gifts of God that are yours in Christ Jesus, and then you'll see clearly that joy that is not in what you get but in what you give. How God is using you to love and provide for others. You, as a child of God, living in the image of your Father.

That's how we can have peace and joy in good times and bad.

This freedom was God's plan for you even before the creation of the world... That you live in faith and love, peace and joy, as His dearly loved child. Because you have been set free by the Son of God. And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed! In the Name of Jesus, Amen.