

October 30, 2022

John 8:31-36

“Free Indeed!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A park ranger by the name of Jim Elliott was once caught in a blizzard high in the Rocky Mountains. As a result of the storm he became lost. It was only by the grace of God that he eventually saw a cabin, and crawling to the door with his last ounce of strength, he found it unlocked and crawled in. But being dazed and near exhaustion as he was, he didn't light a fire or take off his wet clothing.

Instead he just laid there on the floor sinking into oblivion. And there he would have stayed and died if it had not been for his St. Bernard dog that came into the cabin after him. He saw his master lying on the floor, and came to wake Jim from his near comatose state. The ranger later said that it was the dog that had saved his life. The dog licked his face until he awoke and started a fire in the fireplace, which made him realize how desperate his situation was. Jim said, when interviewed: "When you're freezing to death, you actually feel warm all over, and don't want to wake up, because it feels so good."

Is this you spiritually? Are you sinking into oblivion - freezing to death - because you are fixed on the desires of the flesh - the desires of the eyes - pride of life? The danger is always there. Pursuing sin is like freezing to death while you feel warm all over. You just don't want to wake up from doing it because it feels so good. We need a St. Bernard to come into our cabin and lick our face and wake us up. And that is what Jesus does in our gospel lesson when he says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." We need to hear these rather strong words. We are in constant need of a fire and the removal of our cold, wet clothing. We need to be set free and remain in that freedom.

Let's hear those words of Jesus again: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." To practice sin means to consciously and willfully chose to do what is evil in the sight of God when we know we should be doing what is good. It springs from a raging heart hostile to God. It is where sin becomes persistent and dominant in the person. It enslaves the person. Paul writes in Romans 6:16, "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?"

As I said, practicing or doing sin can be where a person is fixed on the desires of the flesh - the desires of the eyes - the pride of life. For example, it can be when a person allows himself or herself to be dominated by drunkenness or sexual immorality or hatred. It can be about loving and practicing any type of falsehood. Luther, before he came to faith, was a slave to the false notion that he could earn his salvation by his good works rather than by faith in the obedience of Christ. But before we talk about Luther, I would like to impress upon us the insanity of choosing to be a slave to sin.

Two examples. First, consider Esau. It says in Hebrews 12:16, "See to it ... that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal." Yeah. He sold his soul for some red stew. Afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with worldly tears. Secondly, consider the people of Israel after God's deliverance from their harsh slavery in the land of Egypt. It says Numbers 11:4-6, "Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, 'Oh that we had

meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” Yeah. They were unhappy with the way in which God was taking care of them and wanted to go back to their slavery - like a dog returns to its vomit. The anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague.

As I said a moment ago, Luther was enslaved to the idea that he could save himself by becoming a monk and doing good works to offset his bad works in order to make God accept him. But he was tortured by his thoughts and lived in endless terror over his sins, wondering as to whether he had done enough. He was so enslaved with this mind-set that, on at least one occasion, he confessed his sins to the vicar of the Augustinian order for six hours straight. The vicar tried to explain God’s grace to Luther and that he should surrender to the love of God. He told him that he was making religion far too difficult and that all he needed to do was love God. But Luther was tormented by fears and doubts. Upon those days in the monastery Luther reflected: “I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!”

Practicing sin and being enslaved to sin and death are one and the same thing. This is where consciously and willfully doing sin takes a person. Luther found himself in the abyss of despair so that he was inwardly raging against God while he pretended to love him by his good works. There is only one hope for all who are enslaved to sin. They need to be set free. This can only be done by the Son of God who became flesh and lived a perfect life for us and suffered and died for all our sins on the cross.

We read at the beginning of our gospel lesson: “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’” Keep in mind that Jesus is saying this to the Jews who had believed in him. These Jews had tasted the word of freedom in the forgiveness of sins. It remains to be seen as to what they will now do with this freedom. When one receives the forgiveness of sins there is also added a freedom from sin as the dominating power in a person’s life. **Free Indeed!** ... if we abide in his word.

Aren’t those words extraordinary of Jesus? Do we not want with forgiveness of sins to be free from the dominating power of sin in our lives now and forever? Do we not look forward to the day when we will no longer have to contend with sin at all? Yet, even now, we are to believe that in Jesus there is freedom from sin’s dominating power. **Free Indeed!** ... even though we daily carry around with us the sinful nature until we leave this fallen world behind. Only let us accept his invitation to abide in his word.

It was the vicar of the Augustinian monastery who, in a daring move, appointed Luther to be the teacher of the Bible in Wittenberg. Now Luther would have to study the Bible himself and counsel others from it. It was the best thing that had ever happened to Luther, for as he lectured on the Psalms and the book of Romans, he was led to the gospel of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. In turn, he led many others to the same Scriptures and to the forgiveness of sins through Jesus. It was a staggering number of people who saw the truth in his day.

However, in 1531 he commented on the spiritual state of the people around him 14 years after the Reformation in an exposition of our gospel lesson for this morning. He noted that as quickly as people had believed in the gospel of Jesus so the majority had quickly returned to lives of slavery by practicing sin. He wrote:

In spring all the branches of the trees are full of blossoms so that one wonders where in the world one will go with all the apples and pears. But when a rain or wind comes into the blossoms, they fall off in heaps. Nine tenths probably drop away, hardly one tenth becomes ripe, and some of these no doubt become worm-eaten to boot. This is what happens in the case of the Gospel, too. At first everybody listens to it, and it is a precious thing. It has many pupils. But if things do not go to their liking and one does not speak what they like to hear, people say: "All misfortune comes from the Gospel." That is why the Lord Christ says: "You are My disciples, but ... the important thing is not so much to begin to believe, one must also continue and remain loyal to the Word" ... Stand fast, then, hold on, do not flee, do not draw back. If you have begun to believe, carry it through to the end. There are many who stay with it ... but not ten per cent have remained faithful till now ... Let those who stand, stand; let those who will not stand, fall away if they please.

It is my prayer that you will not be one of those blossoms that fall from the tree or a piece of fruit that becomes worm-eaten and rotten. If any of us are in danger of being so, then consider this our wake-up call. The Son has set us free and we are **Free Indeed!** May we not abuse this liberty only to find ourselves practicing sin and being enslaved to death again. Let us not be like those who bear thorns and thistles so that we are worthless and near to being cursed and burned, as the writer to the Hebrews [6:8-12] states. Instead, let us be imitators of those who, having been set free, through faith and patience inherit the promises of God.

Amen.