

Sermon for the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
(Reformation)

Freedom from shackles

Text: John 8:34 and 8:36

8:34 Jesus replied “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin”

8:36 Jesus said to them, “If the Son sets you free, then you will be really free.”

(I am following Andy’s lead of looking for a sermon from the Lutheran pastor Vince Gerhardy, with a couple of minor tweaks to make it fit our congregation here, in place of examples he used with his congregation in Brisbane Australia.

As things turned out, one good strong Reformation Sunday sermon on pastor Vince’s website uses Christ’s words in today’s Gospel reading about us being **slaves to sin**.

I am pretty sure that in our own minds – as in the minds of the Jews that Christ was speaking to – we may be uncomfortable describing ourselves as slaves, especially slaves to sin. That’s OK, the Jews that Jesus was speaking to didn’t like the description either, as we will hear.

I hope you’ll agree with me that when Jesus ruffles feathers, he ruffles them for the best of reasons. So let’s hear more from Pastor Vince Gerhardy about how Jesus makes us truly free from our slavery to sin.)

People want Freedom so much that they will risk their lives for it. Wars have been fought to restore freedom to people who felt the shackles of tyranny, the pain of cruelty and the injustice of rule by foreign powers or local dictators.

To the Ukrainian or Lebanese refugee from war, freedom means getting across a border to a place where there is safety, and where a family can live as normal as life as possible, even if it's half a world away from what was their home.

In the smaller picture, we can see struggles for freedom in our own community and our own families.

To the patient, freedom can mean release from a hospital bed and maybe even having good health once again.

To the addicted, freedom means no more relying on substances or harmful behaviours to feel good or to deal with the world.

And for many of us, freedom has meant getting away from difficult work, either with vacations, or the blessing of a better job, or even retirement.

Starting in the 1960s there arose a new idea of freedom – freedom began to mean doing as you please. This led to blurring the distinction between right and wrong, to the point now that some important wrongs have become re-defined as right, and objecting to what used to be wrong is now illegal.

People claim they have been freed from all the old taboos and restrictions.

Modern cultural norms promote drugs and alcohol, pornography, having sex whenever and with whoever, murdering the unborn,

violence, robbery, greed, contempt, dark powers, selfishness. I could go on.

These have become expressions of people's "new freedom".

Somewhere parents stopped teaching Christian faith and values, believing they were giving their children freedom from the old ways. Instead they have just given their kids a new slavery – self-centredness.

In today's gospel reading, John describes Jesus talking about freedom. First, Jesus says, "**The truth will set you free**". Now, if I went out on to the street and said, "Hey buddy, I want to tell you something really important. You believe you are a free person, right? Ha! You're not! You need the **truth** to set you free!" I'm sure that person would think I'm nuts. He would either walk away or would say, "We live in Canada. Of course I'm free. Give your head a shake!"

Jesus' Jewish listeners thought about the same. They were descendants of Abraham. This gave them a privileged position with God. They didn't fear any punishment for any sin. And I'm going to guess that their feathers were ruffled when Jesus called them slaves. A few might even have **owned** slaves, although the Law of Moses would have frowned on that. For sure, nobody owned **them**.

Then Jesus reminds his listeners, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a **slave to sin**." People don't like to be reminded of this. They think that the church harps on about sin too much.

They say they don't like talking about slavery and sin and sickness and death when they come to church – church should be

a happy place. This whole idea of being a “slave to sin” is *waaay* too old fashioned for the modern church.

But there’s no denying Jesus’ words here.

- To be called a slave to sin is serious stuff
- A slave is controlled by someone with power. In this case, it is **sin** that controls us, the power of sin
- A slave is usually a slave for the rest of his or her life. We are bound to sin all of our lives.

“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin”. Jesus doesn’t leave much room for doubt here. There is an *ongoing action of sinning* included here in the language.

Not just individual sinful actions but a way of life – slavery as a **condition** we can’t escape from. There isn’t a moment in our lives that sin doesn’t try to control us.

One symbol of slavery is chains or shackles. They bind and restrict freedom. They can’t be removed. They cause pain. They are a constant reminder that our whole being belongs to someone else or in this case **something** else – sin.

A slave can’t break his own chains and be genuinely free. Even if he should somehow break the chains, that slave is still a slave.

This is the human dilemma, even as we humans try to free ourselves, break our own chains.

- We might go to self-improvement classes;
- attend counselling sessions so we can improve our behaviour;
- go to therapy groups to try and be more positive and less influenced by our selfish nature;

- we might distinguish between big sins and little sins and say the little ones don't count;

but none of these things change what Jesus said, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin".

It's Reformation Sunday. Here's the connection with October 31 1517.

Five centuries ago, Martin Luther found himself in a church that provided an elaborate self-improvement scheme with the promise of giving people personal freedom.

Freedom from sin was offered in all shapes and sizes. Luther himself was caught up in trying to make right all his wrongs – to get rid of his chains of slavery.

But in spite of assurances from the highest levels, the words of Jesus still stood, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin". No self-improvement scheme was going to break those chains.

What Jesus says next brings relief. It's not up to the slave to free himself. Jesus says, "If the Son sets you free, you are truly free." It is the Son who breaks the shackles and chains.

Doing that changes the relationship between the slave and the master. The slave is no longer a slave but becomes a son, a daughter.

The Son declares us free. Only the Son of God can do this.

In the Lutheran tradition, Sunday School and Confirmation classes teach us these words from Luther's Small Catechism.

- "At great cost He has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person,

- He has freed me from sin, death and the power of the devil –
- not with silver or gold
- but with his holy and precious blood
- and his innocent suffering and death.
- All this he has done that I may be his own....”

(Speaking for myself as one of the newer Lutherans here, I really like Lutheran theology and its solid scriptural foundations. There’s clarity in what we believe. Our gratitude and hope are based on the works of the Lord, not our own feeble efforts.)

“The truth will set you free”, Jesus said earlier.

At Jesus’ trial Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”

Well, here it is. The marvellous, extraordinary, mind-blowing truth that God has come to earth and muddied himself with our worldly filth in order to break the chains and shackles of sin that bind every single human being.

Jesus came to rescue us from slavery to sin. He doesn’t dismiss sin as irrelevant or make excuses on our behalf. He confronts us with the truth – we are sinners -- and He came to break sin’s power over us.

He gave his life for us on the cross; to free us from the power that sin and the Evil One hold over us.

God shatters the chains of sin and declares us holy and clean.

He restores friendship with us. He claims us as his sons and daughters.

He forgives us even though we don’t deserve it.

This is **grace**. It is a gift that is grasped in faith.

The freedom that Christ gives fills us with hope.

There **is** a life that breaks the shackles of sin that wear us down, and the chains of evil that cause us to be so ashamed of the way we carry on.

There is **hope** that breaks the manacles of depression and sickness and on-going medical treatment – the love of a Saviour who calls us his own friends and will not leave our side.

There is **life** that breaks apart the shackles of guilt and shame that hold us back. There is **freedom** in forgiveness and fresh starts.

There is **life beyond** the chains of death – a new life in the glorious place we call heaven.

We are forgiven. We are free to live joyful and guilt free lives. We are free to be what God intended us to be – to *love, serve and forgive others* as God has *loved, served and forgiven us*.

“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Let’s keep on reminding ourselves of this truth every day, including the truth that we **need** to be set free.

We may find it difficult to adjust to this freedom that Jesus gives. Maybe we slip back. We need forgiving, again.

We can each turn again to Jesus in faith and repentance and be told *again* that **the Son** has set us free.

“If the Son sets you free, then you will be free indeed.” Truly free. What an awesome gift. It’s Good News that has changed our lives, and will keep changing our lives. We’re made new. And yet we’re still growing. God’s not done with us yet.

That's grace! That's freedom.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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Amended and delivered by Stuart Elliot Oct 27 2024