

**“Free Indeed”**

*“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).*

Visiting people in jail is one of the most humbling parts of my job. Aside from the circumstances that make this kind of visit necessary, physically spending time in a jail or a prison has a sobering effect on you. From the moment you walk into the building you feel a foreboding sense of dread as a stone-faced officer in the lobby asks for your identification and questions your reasons for coming. Once your visit has been approved, you're required to empty your pockets: keys, change, wallet, phone, everything but the Bible goes into a plastic basket and remains with the guard. You then go through a metal detector and a series of steel doors, each one slamming shut and locking behind you before the next one opens. Finally, you arrive alone at the visitation room which contains of a collection of cubicles separated by concrete partitions. Each visitation stall is equipped with a stainless steel stool bolted to the floor and a thick, black phone on the wall so you can talk with the person you've come to see and, as you wait for the inmate to appear, you stare through a large Plexiglas window into an equally stark booth on the other side. It's a dismal and discouraging place and each time I visit the jail these feelings of dread return anew.

On one particular trip to the jail a few years ago, I finished my visit with the inmate and hung the phone back on its cradle. He left his stool on the other side of the window and the guard in charge escorted him out. I walked over to the door very ready leave the harsh visitation room. There's a video camera that looms in the corner of the room and usually when I would approach the door to leave, the guard monitoring the video feed would see me at the door and, after a few seconds of standing in front of the heavy steel door, the lock would buzz and release and I would be on my way. On this particular day however, the lock remained silent and the door remained sealed. After waiting for a minute or two, I pushed the button by the door which I assumed would alert the guard in charge...but after several more minutes in which I continued to push the silver button, the door remained locked.

Now remember the guard in the lobby had my phone. I had no way of contacting anyone and as I looked through the tiny porthole in the door I realized that there was no one around to hear my knocking. Ten minutes passed, then thirty. I continued to push the button. I stared into the camera and waved my hands back and forth to try to catch someone's eye in the control room. Nothing worked and as time continued to pass my annoyance began to turn into panic. Was anyone listening? Did anyone even know I was there? My visit had occurred late in the day and I seriously began to wonder if I might end up spending the night in the jail. At this point, I was for all intents and purposes a prisoner and it was a feeling of fear that I'll never forget.

After what seemed like hours and with my knuckles red from constantly knocking on the door, I heard something in the hallway. I jumped to my feet and peered through the window just in time to see a guard coming toward the door. After nearly two hours of being trapped in the visitation room I was freed! As quickly as I could move without creating alarm in the guard I gathered my things and walked through the doors into the evening air and it felt wonderful! I can also tell you that on the short trip back to church I wore my seat belt, I drove below the speed limit and stopped well-behind the white line at all of the red lights. A little time in captivity goes a long way and it's something I never want to feel again. Martin Luther never spent a day in jail, but he understood well the fear and anxiety of being a prisoner. The captivity that plagued Luther and so many Christians of his day was a spiritual bondage from which freedom seemed impossible. He had tried everything he could to free himself from the guilt of his sin, but no matter what he gave up and no matter how many good things he did to try to make up for his sin he couldn't experience freedom. He was on the verge of despair when God spoke to Luther through His Word and revealed the freedom that Christ died to give His people. On this anniversary of the Reformation we celebrate the incredible truth that Jesus has set sinners free!

In today's reading from John, Jesus talks about the freedom He came to bring when he says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). This comment from Jesus brought an immediate objection from some of the people in the crowd, and in a response that clearly shows their arrogance and misunderstanding, the Jews in the audience answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” (John 8:33).

If we're honest, they responded exactly like we might respond to someone who challenged our freedom...but the truth is we are all imprisoned and enslaved by sin. Sometimes this captivity to sin is obvious as we watch lives of family members or friends being torn apart by bad decisions and blatant transgressions. But there are also other more subtle and

perhaps more dangerous sins; dangerous because they happen in places and at times which allow us to keep them hidden; dangerous because they allow us to hang onto the illusion that we are in control; dangerous because our personal, subtle, hidden flaws enable us to deny our slavery to sin. Whether our sin is obvious or subtle, public or private, socially acceptable or socially reprehensible, we so often deal with it in the same way: We deny it. We give the same answer we hear in today's reading from John, "We have never been slaves" of anyone, and when we do this, "we deceive ourselves and the truth (of God's Word) is not in us" (I John 1:8).

You see, today, the words of Jesus pin us down in a way that makes our bondage to sin impossible to ignore. Jesus says, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). And in today's epistle reading, Paul clarifies this point further when he writes that, "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory" and there is nothing we can do to restore us to a place of righteousness (Romans 3:23 and 20). Just like the humbling reality I felt when I pulled on the locked door of that visitation room, God's Word makes it clear that there is no denying our captivity to sin. In fact, when we reject our captivity or, to put it another way, when we deny our sin, we are only pulled farther away from true freedom.

The truth is, at the time of the Reformation the church was captive not to the illusion that they were without sin, but rather to the delusion that we can actually free ourselves from sin through our own efforts and good works. This lie was most blatantly expressed in the church of Luther's day through the selling of indulgences. These indulgences amounted to the actual purchasing of forgiveness and the end result was a church that held her own people captive; slaves to a twisted and false teaching of self-righteousness that led them away from the free gift of salvation Christ died to deliver.

The Reformation proclaimed freedom, and the message of the Reformation is as important and powerful today as it was on October 31, 1517. The meaning of the Reformation and the meaning of God's Word for us today is one and the same: In Christ, we have been released! In Christ, we have been set free! This is the message that God revealed to Martin Luther through His Word in a time of dire captivity; and this is the message He is giving us in our captivity today. Jesus said, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:36). And the truth is that God has given us His Son, and that through His death on the cross – death in our place – we have been set free; free from the slavery of sin; free from the fear of death; free from the power of the devil, and free to serve others in love. The Son has set us free, and as we heard in Jesus' own words "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The fear I felt that day as I sat in the jail, is nothing compared to the fear we feel when we are faced with the reality of our sin. Have you ever felt like freedom from sin is impossible? Have you ever felt like your sins are unforgivable? The devil wants us to feel trapped, the devil wants us to think that we are still prisoners of sin and he will use the troubles of the present and the memories of the past to try to keep us in false chains. But each and every day, God comes to us in His Word and He proclaims the truth; the truth that the bonds of sin have been destroyed; the truth that the power of sin to imprison us has been removed. The truth that our sin has been taken away, washed clean, erased from God's memory – not by our own efforts, not by our good intentions, but by the blood of Jesus, shed on a cross for us.

Paul writes, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace" (Romans 3:23-24). This justification by grace through faith is the freedom we have received in Christ and it is the very heart of the God's message to us in Scripture. It is the essence of the Reformation of Martin Luther and it is the reason for our reformation as well. The cost of true freedom is a cost we could never pay, but the Good News of the Gospel is that this cost has been paid in full; completely, unconditionally, and without one ounce of our effort and in this Gospel all fear has been removed and we can now willingly and freely serve our Lord in joy!

Today we are the beneficiaries of the Reformation. Through the work of Luther and others, the message of the Gospel has been preserved for us and yet there are so many in this world who are still captive to sin. Some live next door to us. Some work and go to school with us. Some are even part of our own families. To these people...to these prisoners...to these terrified and troubled souls for whom Christ died we have a message of freedom and we have a word of life: Jesus sets us free! Because of His life, death, and resurrection, our sins cannot cut us off from God. And because it is God's doing from start to finish, we don't have to wonder whether we have done enough or if we have done it well enough. We hold on to the truth of God's grace alone, received by faith alone and revealed to us in Scripture alone and that truth assures us that "if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!" Go in the peace of this truth, without fear, without guilt, and proclaim true freedom in Christ alone. Amen.

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