

SERMON
Reformation Sunday

October 28, 2007

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A park ranger by the name of John Elliott was once caught in a blizzard high in the Rocky Mountains. As a result of the storm he became disorientated and lost. It was only by the grace of God that he came across a deserted cabin. With his last ounce of strength he made it to the cabin door and found it to be unlocked.

He opened the door and fell to the floor. But because he was so dazed and exhausted, he didn't light a fire or take off his wet clothing. Instead he laid down on the floor sinking into unconsciousness. If it had not been for his St Bernard, he would have died. You see, his dog had followed him into the cabin.

She saw her master lying on the floor, and kept licking him and nudging him trying to arouse him from his comatose state. The ranger later said that it was his dog that saved his life. Her persistence kept him awake and made him realize how desperate his situation really was.

John went to say; "When you are freezing to death, you eventually become numb. You actually feel warm all over. You don't want to wake up because it feels too good."

Sometimes I feel that this is also how it works in our spiritual lives. There are times when become numb to realizing our own sinfulness. We really don't feel that we are so close to death.

After all, things seem to be going okay in our lives. Certainly we have the common stresses that accompany everyday life in general. But overall things are going pretty good. We have homes to live in, food to eat, a car to drive, jobs that pay us a salary. We have family and friends for companionship.

We live in the wealthiest country in the world. We have many freedoms that are provided to us by the constitution. We can go wherever we want, whenever we want. We can

Speak what we want. We can worship where we want. You could say that we are truly free. But I ask you, is this really the case? Are we TRULY free, or is this just an illusion?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells the Jews who were following him that “the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘We will be made free?’”

Talk about short memories! What about all of that exodus stuff? What about the parting of the Red Sea and Pharaoh’s army chasing their ancestors through the desert? You know, that whole “Moses-leading-them-out-of-slavery-in-Egypt-thing. Wasn’t that central to their faith?

What about all those years of captivity in Babylon where they pleaded for God to free them? And what about the Roman soldiers that were currently parading up and down their streets? How could any Jew ever forget about that?

With that set aside, there was this belief that if you were tied to Abraham, there was no worry. Sin couldn’t touch them. They couldn’t be defiled. Their tie to Abraham guaranteed their salvation.

But Jesus turned all of that around. Jesus says, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” This was hard for the Jews to hear from the mouth of Jesus, and it is hard for us to hear today. As 21st century Americans, we don’t take to well to being called a slave.

But let’s face it. We are all slaves. We are slaves to sin. Doing evil becomes a habit we cannot break. We can be a slave to hatred, filled with hostility, aggressiveness, and rage – ready to strike at any moment. We can be a slave to pride. In our arrogance we can indulge in prejudice and bigotry because we think that we are better than others.

We can be a slave to our own self-importance and self-righteousness. We enjoy telling somebody off when they are wrong. We can be a slave to gossip, indulging ourselves in ruining another’s reputation. We can be a slave to the misuse of sexuality, involving ourselves in such things as adultery, promiscuity, or pornography.

We can be a slave to materialism, always wanting and buying more things to try and satisfy our souls.

Now I don’t want anyone here today to think; “Well, Pastor, you had quite a list there. But there was nothing that really pertained to me. I have not been involved in any of those things.” If this is what you are thinking, that may be the worst sin of all. For you have become a Pharisee – those for whom Jesus had the most severe condemnation.

If that is the case, why do you need Jesus? Why do you need to be set free? Why are you even here at worship? There are so many other things you could be doing on this beautiful morning. But I suspect that deep down in your hearts, you know that there is still something that is enslaving you.

First of all, I would assume that many of you struggle with guilt. Sometimes we have this cloud of guilt hanging over our heads that haunt us day in and day out.

Maybe we have hurt the very ones we love, or haven't been the greatest parent or spouse all of the time. Perhaps we have kept secrets that we don't want anyone to know about.

Maybe we feel guilty about our faith life – we don't pray enough, or we don't always act as Jesus would have us act. Perhaps we feel that we are just not good enough.

We never live up to expectations. Eventually, it all builds up inside of us and makes us feel enslaved.

We dream of how someday, the guilt will be gone, and we can be assured that we have been set free of all that weighs us down. It is a dream for us to be truly free.

There is a story of a man who wrote a letter to the IRS. He wrote:

To whom it may concern,

Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep ever since. If I still have trouble sleeping, I will send you the rest.

Sincerely,

A Tax Payer

You see, guilt will always keep us living under a cloud of condemnation. This is the inner battle Martin Luther felt some 500 years ago. This was the impetus for the beginning of the Reformation. Luther was all too aware of his bondage to sin. And the harder he tried to free himself, the more he failed.

The harder he tried to get God to love him, the more isolated he felt. It was then that he realized that only Christ can give him true freedom. It is Christ that comes to humanity and offers himself as a living sacrifice. And that is what much of the church of his day had lost sight of.

However, Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "Therefore, there is now NO condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ

Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”

Along with feelings of guilt, we all deal with the consequences of sin. For sin DOES have consequences. And the problem is, is that so many times, we can't go back and erase the results of our actions or inactions. A lifetime of self-destructive habits takes its toll.

Sometimes we can't repair the damage done in relationships.

Sometimes, we can't always just “fix” things. Parents often want to fix problems for their children because they don't want them to have to go through pain or suffering. But the consequences of sin eventually bring us into a downward spiral that makes us believe that there is no escape.

Several years ago, I went with a youth group to Colorado for a high adventure trip. One of the things that we did was go white-water rafting. Now I don't know how many of you have ever been white-water rafting, but it is rather frightening to say the least – especially when you are a novice.

When we started out down the river, we felt like we were in control of the raft. But soon the river took over. The water began to swirl around us and tossed us from side to side.

No matter how hard we paddled, or even in what direction, we had no choice but to go through the rapids and down the river. It was the river, and not us who was in control.

In the same way, it is sin that controls our lives. No matter how hard we try, sin will take us down the road to death and destruction.

But you see, just when it seems that our sinfulness has again gained power over us, we hear the words of Jesus; “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” How is this possible you might ask? Perhaps this closing story can help us to better understand.

There once was a man named George Thomas who was a priest in a small New England town. One Sunday morning, he came to the church carrying a rusty, bent, old birdcage.

He set it on the pulpit and began to speak.

“I was walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me, swinging this bird cage. In the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds. They looked frightened and were shivering from the cold. I stopped the boy and asked; “What have you got there son?”

“Oh, just some old birds,” he said. “What are you gonna do with them?” I asked. “Take ‘em home and have some fun with ‘em. I’m gonna tease ‘em, and pull out their feathers to make ‘em fight. I’m gonna have a real good time.”

“But you’ll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do then?” “Well, I got some cats. They like birds. I’ll give ‘em to them.” The priest was silent for a moment.

“How much do you want for those birds, son?”

“Huh?! Why, you don’t want these birds mister. They’re just plain old field birds. They don’t sing – they aren’t even pretty!” “How much?” The boy looked up at him as if he were crazy and said; “how about \$10?”

The priest reached in his pocket and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy’s hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. The priest picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, he opened the door, and gently persuaded the birds out, setting them free.

Well, that explained the empty birdcage on the pulpit, and then the priest began to tell this story:

“One day Satan and Jesus were having a conversation. Satan had just come from the Garden of Eden, and he was gloating and boasting. “Yes sir, I just caught the world full of people down there. Set me a trap, used some bait that I knew they couldn’t resist. Got ‘em all!”

“What are you going to do with them?” Jesus asked.

“Oh, I’m gonna have some fun! I’m going to teach them how to lie and steal. I’ll teach them how to tell hurtful stories about each other. I’ll teach them how to hate and abuse each other – how to invent guns and bombs and kill each other. I’m really gonna have some fun!”

“And what will you do when you get done with them?” Jesus asked. “Oh, I’ll just kill ‘em.” Satan said. “How much do you want for them?” asked Jesus.

“Oh, you don’t want these people. They aren’t any good. Why, if you take them, they’ll just hate you. They’ll go against everything you teach them. They’ll spit on you, curse you, and eventually kill you! You don’t want those people!” said Satan.

“How much?” Jesus replied. Satan looked at Jesus and sneered. “All of your tears and all of your blood.”

So Jesus paid the price. He picked up the cage. He opened the door and gently set us free from the Kingdom of Darkness. No longer do things we’ve done in the past have to haunt us. No longer do we need to be enslaved by guilt.

For we have been liberated. We have been set free to rise above our sinfulness. We are free to live holy lives. We are free to be what God intended us to be. This was the good news in the first century. This was the good news in the 16th century. And this is the good news for us today. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.