

Date: May 10, 2009

Title: Live the Word of Christ and Be Free

Scripture: John 8:31-38

John 8:31-38 (NRSV) ³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸ I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father."

SING Bob Dylan's GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY

How many of you are familiar with Bob Dylan? He is indeed an interesting character. If you are familiar with the song you know that there are 3 or 4 more verses, but in the four that we sang, I think you get the point that all of us serve somebody.

I think that this is one of the points that Jesus is making to the Jews to which He is speaking. See, the Jews had this notion that they were a chosen people and they believed that because they did not serve as a house slave or as a slave in the field, they were free. Everyone in Judea lived under Roman occupation and that made them slaves to Cesar in a way, but especially the religious authorities did not consider themselves slaves because they had some autonomy and a fair amount of wealth and status. They were still able to partake in their religious rituals and so the idea that someone would tell them that they were slaves, seemed totally ridiculous.

I think I know where they were coming from. There was a time in my life that if anyone would have suggested that I was a slave, I too would have bristled at the idea. I was a free man living in the US of A and I could do what ever I chose to do. I had a job, I had a credit card, and I had confidence that I could handle what ever came along. Of course that was before I had given my life to Jesus. And that was before I began to feel the effects of some of my sinful actions. That was back when I really believed that my life was **my** life and I didn't need any 2000 year old legend to show me how to live. I was free to try anything; do anything; be anything; go anywhere. All I needed was a little bit of desire and a little effort and it could all be mine because I was free to do as I pleased.

But, you know life has a way of showing us things. Life has a way of opening our eyes to realities that can be painful. If we are just a little bit open to it, life has a way of showing

us where we are missing the target. Life has a way of showing us when we are shooting for the wrong target. And eventually, after a lot of searching and struggling, I began to see that this so called 2000 year old legend might be able to show me more than I had ever realized.

I began to see that this man that so many had been following and learning from and relying on for all these years really did have something to offer me. I began to realize that what Jesus had to offer was truth and it was that truth that helped me begin to really get what is and is not truly important.

I began to see that the more I was able to live according to that truth, the more I was truly free to live a focused, intentional, vital and meaningful life. I was able to realize that without the truth of Christ, I had been living a shallow, self absorbed, scattered, and at worst meaningless life; not at all the life that God had created me for. However, with the grace of God active in my life I was able to see what true freedom looked like. I began to see where I had been influenced by things that were not of God and even though this was at times a painful process, I began to recognize that the truth that Jesus offered was not confining and restrictive but liberating.

I went through a process similar to something I read in the book Deep Change by Robert Quinn. In this book Quinn writes about a program designed principally for business students. The program encouraged participants to consider a time when they had made a crucial decision which upon later reflection they were not proud of. They were encouraged to list all of the competing factors that had influenced their decision. Then the students were encouraged to consider how those competing factors might have been better managed. One participant wrote about one of his experiences and in this exercise realized that he had put several people's life at risk primarily because he wanted to look good to his superior. In an effort to please the man in charge of the project he had made a decision that easily could have resulted in tragedy.

This is the sort of pressure that Jesus was talking about when he used the term "slave to sin." All too often we make decisions not considering what will be best in the long run, what will serve the most people or what is the most moral thing to do, but rather we consider what will look the best, feel the best, taste the best, to me or to those I would like to impress. When this is at the core of our thought process we might as well be living in a cage.

In this morning's scripture, Jesus is saying that when anything other than God is at the heart of our decision-making process we find ourselves "slaves to sin." We are so strongly influenced by factors other than God that we lose sight of God altogether and our lives can become all about meeting the immediate needs of short sighted priorities rather than living for the glory of God. We are in effect missing the target that God has set out for us to hit. That is what sin means; missing the mark. We are slaves to sin when we are preoccupied with things that don't really benefit God's Kingdom. And it really doesn't matter what we say we believe or say we value, it is how we actually live and what we actually do with our time and our treasure that lets us know when we are slaves to sin.

So, how do we escape from the cage? How do we release ourselves from the captivity of small priorities and life-stealing decisions? The answer is of course, **we believe**. But believe not just in an intellectual fashion; not in the way we believe something we read in the papers or hear on the news. If we are to escape the cage of sin, we must believe in such a way that everything we do is based on this belief. We must become a new creation.

William Barclay says that if we are to believe in this life changing way we must do four things. These are not sequential things but four things that sort of happen all the time and all at the same time:

1. One of the things we do is we listen for the ever present voice of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In part this is our conscience, but also we must listen not so much with physical ears but with spiritual ears to what is happening around us. Events, conversations, thoughts that come to mind; all of these things are ways that the Holy Spirit communicates with us.
2. A second activity is constant learning. Learning informs our listening. We learn by reading scripture and books that help us know more about Jesus' life and teachings. Did you know that the word disciple actually means "Learner?" The truth is, we can't really be a disciple if we are not also learning. But learning isn't a one-time thing. It's not like learning to ride a bicycle; once you learn you know it. Learning as a disciple of Christ is a life long endeavor; which brings me to the third thing.
3. Continued study. Some traditions call this "staying in the word." We can never learn all that we need to know by reading through the text of the New Testament one time, or by reading one of the commentaries of the Bible. The Bible is a living text that interacts with our lives. As we read and study, we find new ways for this incredible book to speak to us regarding what is currently happening in our lives or the lives of people we know. If we are to be effective disciples or, "learners" we must never stop learning.
4. The fourth thing is that we obey. This is where what we learn comes into existence. This is where we are called to walk our talk. The lives we live, the decisions we make, the results we see in our lives are pretty clear indicators of how well we are living out what we learn when we read the scriptures.

Jesus says that we are to stay in His word and the truth we find there will bring genuine freedom into our lives. When we practice all four of the things I just listed our belief in Christ gets stronger and our desire and tendency to sin becomes weaker. The stronger Christ is in our lives, the more freedom we experience.

I began this message with the song, "Gotta Serve Somebody." The truth that we are all going to have to serve somebody is something that we cannot escape. But if first and foremost we serve Jesus Christ; if everything we do and say rests on this one truth, then we will be able to serve in freedom and love and service will not be a burden,....it will be a blessing.

What Jesus was trying to tell us is that the only way we can find true freedom is to make Jesus the center of our lives. When we listen to, learn from, study and obey what Jesus brought to us, we are able to move through life free of the cage that can so easily drag us down and keep us from a life of freedom and purpose.

I believe that freedom calls to each one of us. I believe that we were all born with a deep longing for freedom. But so often, what we seek is a false freedom. We believe that if we have just a little more money we will finally have the freedom we long for; if we get that degree or that job or buy that house or that car, *then* we will experience the freedom we long for. Maybe we are seeking a relationship believing that it will offer the promise of true freedom. Or maybe like the Pharisees of Jesus' time we think that if we are super religious, we will be free.

Everywhere we turn we have people encouraging us to miss the target. Inevitably, we are going to fall for some of them, but none of these things ever really deliver as promised. But there is one promise that we can trust. We can trust the promise that Jesus made when he said to his disciples:

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

If we live deeply in God's word I believe that we will know the truth and the truth will naturally lead us to obey Jesus' teachings. And if we obey Jesus' teachings every one can be free:

Beggars and bankers; the mistreated and mistrusted; the righteous and the religious can all be free if they will know Jesus' truth and "obey [His'] teachings."

Live in the word of Christ - Know the truth - Live free. It really can be that simple. When we let one guiding force shape and mold our lives, everything else takes second place, and suddenly, the cage of sin that keeps us constantly worrying and fretting and bound up falls away and we are free..... We are truly FREE. Amen.