

**Pastor Troy Schreiner—Victory Lutheran Church, Jacksonville**

**November 3, 2019—First Sunday of End Time—Reformation Sunday**

**Series/Theme: Welcome Home, Where You Are Free to Be Yourself**

**Sermon Text: John 8:31-36—Free Indeed!**

There once was a fish who lived in a large pond. Every day, he swam past the same rocks and plants, always confined by the banks and boundaries of the pond. He watched ducks land on the water, and then take off into the blue sky above. He watched deer drink from the pond, and then run off into the surrounding green forests. And the fish became jealous. Because in his mind, he was trapped in that pond, while all the other animals had freedom. So the fish hatched a plan. Swimming towards the edge of the pond as fast as he could, he leaped out of the water, cleared the bank, and landed in the soft grass, joyfully thinking, “I’m free!”

But obviously, he didn’t possess the freedom he craved. The fish assumed that because the pond had contained him, it restricted his freedom. And if we could get rid of those limitations, he’d finally be free. But instead of freedom, he found destruction. Outside of that pond, he had no freedom to swim, or breathe, or live. The limits of that pond were for his good. The problem was, the fish didn’t understand what he was.

That fish’s thinking closely mirrors the mindset much of our society has about freedom, namely, that true freedom is found by removing all limitations or restrictions. Freedom means getting to do, think, and say whatever I feel is right. Therefore, any claims of absolute truth—truths which apply to everyone—are deemed to restrict our personal freedom.

That’s why Christianity is sometimes said to be a straitjacket. Because the Christian faith is built on several absolute truths, many believe it prevents people from being truly free to think and act for themselves. Is that true? As a Christian, can you be truly **Free Indeed?** Our service theme today is **Welcome Home, Where You Are Free to Be Yourself.** But in order to be free to be yourself, you have to understand who and what you are.

In our sermon text, Jesus makes it clear that we do need to be set free. But not from any restrictions or limitations. Rather, we need to be set free... from ourselves! He tells some of the Jews who followed him, ***“If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*** That last part, ***“The truth will set you free”*** is one of those Jesus quotes that’s been pulled out of context and given a bunch of different meanings. You can find it in libraries, in university slogans, as the title of self-help books, even in secular movies and music. Society often uses that phrase to teach that whatever kind of knowledge you pursue, whatever you have deemed to be “truth,” will give you the freedom you desire. But what is truth? And what do we need to be set free from?

Jesus didn’t say “Whatever you think is truth” will set you free. He says, ***“If you hold to my teaching...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*** Jesus’ teaching, the message of God’s Word, is the only truth that can set you free. That’s offensive to some, when Jesus says things like, ***“No one comes to the Father except through me.”*** Or the fact that God lays down Ten Commandments to govern everyone’s lives. Doesn’t God’s Word limit and restrict people’s freedom?

Not if you understand who you are apart from God. We’re not enlightened scholars or nobles who just need a few limitations or restrictions removed so we can take ourselves to where we need to be. On our own, we’re spiritual slaves, locked away in the deepest, darkest dungeons of sin, incapable of freeing ourselves. As Jesus says, ***“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”*** Therefore, we need someone to set us free from sin!

The Jews Jesus spoke to didn't really know themselves. When Jesus encouraged them to hold to his teaching so they could be set free, they responded, **"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"** If these Jews were speaking in a political sense, they failed history class, since Israel was enslaved or exiled a pretty large chunk of their history. But they didn't understand their spiritual slavery either. They thought that because they were Abraham's descendants, God's chosen people, they didn't need to be set free. What they didn't understand was what Paul wrote to the Romans, **"There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** It didn't matter if they were physical sons of Abraham, because they were spiritual slaves to sin!

And that's exactly why the limitations and restrictions of God's law are for our good. We're very good at painting a much rosier picture of ourselves than what's truly reflected in the mirror. We rely on things like our Lutheran heritage, or the good things we've accomplished, or our church membership, and think those things make us free. But those things just divert our eyes from the shackles around our wrists and ankles. They distract us from who we really are by ourselves. As Paul writes, **"No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.** God's law isn't boundaries that restrict my freedom. God's law is a mirror that lets me see who I really am--a slave to sin, who needs to be set free.

And by God's grace, we have been! For **"all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."** By always following God's law perfectly, and by suffering hell as the substitute for undeserving slaves like us, Jesus snapped the chains of sin, ripping them out of the hands of our slave master Satan. With his resurrection, Jesus destroyed the bonds of death that coiled tighter around us with every sin. Through the lenses of God's holy law, we know ourselves—slaves to sin, deserving of hell. But as Jesus says, **"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** Through the lens of the gospel, you're no longer a slave who **"has no permanent place in the family.** Rather, you're a sibling; a son; a sister. And a **"son belongs to [God's family] forever."**

When Jesus tells us to hold to his teaching, he doesn't just mean the law. He especially means the Gospel! When we cling to the Gospel through faith, we're set free for eternity! That's who you are in Christ—a former slave, rescued and set free to be a child of God.

Imagine how that fish's perspective would have changed if, as he lay there slowly dying on the grass, someone scooped him up, and tossed him back into the water. Never again would he see that pond as a boundary that restricted his freedom. He'd now see those boundaries as sources of freedom, by keeping him where he needed to be.

Since we've been set free for eternity, we react that same way towards God's Word. Instead of seeing God's Word as restricting my freedom, I see it as necessary restrictions to guide me to freely live in a way that thanks God for setting me free!

True freedom isn't me getting to do, say, or think whatever I want. That leads to slavery. True freedom is me wanting to do what I should, which God has promised will lead to blessings for me and others. As Pastor Timothy Keller writes in his book, *The Reason for God*, **"Freedom isn't the absence of limitations or constraints, but it is finding the right ones, those that fit our nature and liberate us."**

We do this all the time in life. If a person has musical gifts, they spend tons of time practicing. Obviously, that practice time restricts their freedom to do other things like play sports or video games. But by deliberately limiting their freedom to practice, they free themselves for a richer kind of freedom-- to travel, perform, and make beautiful music that gives them fulfillment! Same thing with losing weight, which requires me to limit

my freedom through diet or exercise. But by restricting your freedom to eat whatever you want, or by giving your time to exercise, you receive the freedom of better health, and the freedom to do things you couldn't do before.

So yes, God's law does limit and restrict us from doing whatever we want. But in that restriction, there is a greater freedom—the ability to serve the God who freed us. The freedom to live in a way that God promises to bless. The freedom to resist temptation, to break the addiction of sin, and to not fall back into the slavery we've been freed from.

Can you imagine a slave being set free, his shackles dropping to the ground—and he stoops down and puts them back on? Or a judge setting a prisoner free, and the prisoner immediately goes and robs the judge's house? Unimaginable, right? And yet, isn't that exactly what we're doing if we drop God's Word, and pick back up our slavery to sin?

That's why, when Satan tempts you, instead of hearing him lie that God restricts your freedom, hear the sound of chains, to remind you who you are—you're a former slave to sin! So don't put those chains back on!

And the times when you do fall into sin, instead of hearing Satan's voice lie that God won't forgive you, hear the sound of chains again. But not the sound of chains being bound, but of chains hitting the ground, because in repentance, Jesus has freed you from slavery to that sin as well. That's who you are. A sinner, yes, but a sinner who's been set free from every sin through Christ!

I'm guessing pretty much all of you act differently when you're at home than you do out in public, right? You might do or say silly things at home with your family that you'd never do out in public. You probably wear clothes more comfortable than stylish, because at home, you're not trying to impress anyone. And in the same way, you've been set free to be yourself with your church family.

You don't have to convince everyone you're perfect, and have your life perfectly pulled together. You can admit your sins and your weaknesses. And you can be fully confident in the forgiveness that you wear, because you know who you are—a former slave to sin, who is free indeed, through faith in Christ. And that is what all of us are!

As a family of believers, we can rejoice together in the freedom of serving God, because we understand who we really are. Former slaves, celebrating and praising together, with the chains of sin lying broken at our feet.