

Order of Worship for May 20th, 2012,

Text: John 8:31-38

Title: "Freedom"

Theme: The house of freedom is built on the foundation of faith with the building blocks of truth.

Call to worship: Psalm 67:1-7

Sunday Night in the Word
The Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5:1-12, The Beatitudes
5:30 pm to 7:00 pm in the Music Building

Pre Service Song

"I Will Call Upon the Lord" Song # 530

Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment:

Missions, Dennis Hurt
Awana Year End Wrap Up, Tim Giordano

Call to Worship and Prayer Psalm 67:1-7

Preparing the Heart in Song:

"My Faith Has Found a Resting Place" Song # 528

"I Know Whom I Have Believed" Song # 527

Offering and Offertory

Special Music: Hosanna Girls Choir Mini Concert

Message: "Freedom" John 8:31--38
Pastor John Bronson

Songs of Gladness for God's Grace:

"My Life is In You, Lord" Song # 542

Parting Word of Grace and Invitation to Prayer

Resolution Ceremony
11 am to Noon in the Sanctuary
All are invited to attend

Sunday Evening Studies:

The Sermon on the Mount:
Matthew 5:1-12, The Beatitudes
5:30-7 pm in the Music Building

Steve and Carol Lyons in Tanzania, Africa who are spreading the gospel via conversational English and “religion” classes taught to 360 students at a private college. The Lyons are appealing to **us** to send short-term workers to help them teach English and disciple new believers. Pray for the spread the gospel throughout eight Muslim tribes along the coast.

President Obama to humble himself before the Lord and cry out to Him for mercy and wisdom to govern this great nation. Please turn the heart of the President toward the foundational truths of our nation and the Word of God.

The Deacons as Paul prayed in Philippians 1: for grace and peace; for effectiveness in spreading the Good News; for courage and strength to complete their work by God’s grace; that they will overflow with knowledge and discernment in dealing with the needs of many people; that their wisdom and practical Christ-filled love will abound more and more, touching many lives; that they will seek the presence of Jesus in all they do.

College Student of the Week: Patti Ott, CSU Chico (wife of Larry) that she can actually get some rest and peace to rejuvenate over the summer before starting her final and hardest semester.

Military Personnel of the Week: MSgt Tye Turner (husband of Kathy): just had eye surgery, please pray for everything to heal well so he can return to his unit. Unit at Beale doing well right now, may deploy in December. It is Police week right now—please pray for all police personnel and their families.

Please pray for the health and recovery of our church family: Carol Bernerd, Marsha Bernhard, Harley Chapman Sr., Nathan Giordano, Diane Kinnamont, Carol Koehler, Mike Kokoletsos, Volker Ladendorf, Roseanne Lane, Dick & Jane Miller, John Montgomery, Fred & Jean Pauly, Phil Peterson, Jean Price, Cindy Rodney, John Stancik, Wally Yates

(please call the office to request updates to this list)

Today we are going to be looking at a topic that ought to grab most of us. The topic is “freedom”. That is the title for the message. Certainly for those of you who have had the privilege, and I have had the privilege in times past, to go to Washington D.C. all of a sudden [you] have a large chunk of history suddenly laid out in front of you. Unfortunately, as Mr. Cagnacci so movingly let us know, much of that history, and particularly the aspect which reveals the deep Christian influence on the founding of this nation, much of that history is not taught any more, and that is to our great loss. [This is a loss which bears directly on our understanding and the continuance of our freedoms.]

Well today we are going to be looking at “freedom”, seeing what Jesus has to say about it. We are going to look at John 8:31-38. I encourage you to turn there. I am going to read the text as we begin reflecting on Jesus and His words about freedom.

“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ They answered him, ‘We are off-spring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, “You will become free”?’” Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father and you do what you have heard from your father.’”

The passage that we are looking at poses, particularly for us evangelical type Christians, a number of question because of the way we will now hear Jesus begin to talk to people who say they believe in Him. The questions that rightly come to mind are: what does it mean to say somebody believes? A second question comes out of this passage: what is freedom and under what conditions is freedom experienced or realized. Another intimately related question is what is the relationship between truth and freedom? A fourth question which I think is found here is, what is the relationship between sin and slavery, truth and freedom? If you are reflective at all you know that I am not going to cover all this because that is impossible! Those questions are some of the most profound questions with which human beings wrestle in trying to under the nature of the human experience and how it is we are going to structure our societies and our personal lives both in order to realize our freedoms. But we will try and understand a little bit of what Jesus said to those who said they believed in Him.

The first thing I want us to do is to take a moment and think about the word *belief* or *believe*. When a person says they believe, what do we understand them to mean? When looking for the meaning of a word a good place to begin is the dictionary. So I went to our dictionary and these are the definitions that I found for the word “*believe*”: to believe is to take as true or real; it is to have confidence in a statement or a promise: I believe what you have to say to me. A third meaning is to suppose or expect: I believe it will be a nice day tomorrow as it is today. Then another meaning is to have trust or confidence in someone: I believe when so and so says he’ll do something, it is going to happen.” We use the word that way. Then we also use the word in relationship to religious faith: I believe in God, I believe in Jesus. We are familiar with that [usage]. Lastly to believe is to hold opinions: I believe shopping at Ralley’s is better than shopping at. . . It is a matter of opinion. If you reflect on that a moment, if you look over the spectrum of meanings that just covers the common way that Americans use the word believe, you will very quickly realize that to say that someone believes something is not clear at all. Sometimes it is not even clear when we say we believe something because we do not know at what level that word is reflecting [the reality] of our lives.

You will notice, of course, that at one point, obviously, the word *belief* and the word *faith* touch each other. So I thought it might be good if we took a moment and asked, how is the word *faith* commonly used in America? Faith as defined in the dictionary is “unquestioning belief.” Or, more specifically, as you and I would anticipate, unquestioning believe in God or in religion or something of that sort. [Faith] can be a system of beliefs that constitutes a faith. We know there is the Christian faith, the Islamic faith, Hindu faith, and actually most of us

understand today that secularism is a faith, a whole set of the things that they believe to be true, a system woven together. Faith can refer to anything that is believed, and so there are some people who are so strongly committed to their kind of car, that they have faith in Oldsmobiles and they wouldn't dream of buying a Buick! We use the word, we put faith, in a whole variety of things which obviously reflects a wide variety of what I call dispositions of the soul. We come down to the last [which is] complete trust or confidence. I think that often times we think this way when we use the word faith as the way a child usually has faith in his or her parents. The last of those is probably most meaningful [to us], especially in this kind of setting. It was, after all, Jesus who said that unless you have faith as a little child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

If we turn our attention back, and I hope you have your scriptures open and are looking at John 8:31-38, the first thing to put in place if you are going to rightly understand this passage is that the Jews who claim to believe in Jesus are not little children. They do not have a child's faith. John has given us a fairly extensive to or exposure to these Jews [or,] as John generally means when using the term, scribes and Pharisees. Some of them were utterly despicable people. You might recall the episode at the beginning of John 8 where a group of these men found a woman in adultery and hauled her in front of Jesus and said, "What should we do [with her]?" [They] were heartless men. But not all of them [were this way]. Some of them were probably not despicable at all. You might recall a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus in the night. We realized in that conversation he was an honest seeker trying to understand the truth about God.

Understandably we tend to oversimplify what read in the Bible. We do so, we oversimplify, in order to find certainty in understanding when read a passage. When we read that someone believes we want to be able to import to that word, to bring into the words "they believe" all that we know about believing. That way the belief becomes rich and strong and reinforces our own understanding. We tend to do the same thing in conversation. In a casual conversation we will say, "Is so and so a believer? Yes, that person is a believer. They made a profession of faith when they were young, maybe at a weekend retreat, and they have been active during the year and they attended church services." Into this little conversation someone may add a distinction. They will say, "Do you think so and so has saving faith?" That sort of thing normally makes us uncomfortable. Surely the Bible says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved"? Surely the Bible does say that. But by now we know that to say the word "believe" in reference to anybody is not clear. [But] why introduce confusing distinctions and qualifications? After all – inevitably in that conversation this is what is going to happen – who are you to judge? Did you ever run into that? It is a put down. This is how it goes: having started with relatively pleasant certainties – he believes, I believe, we all believe; what a happy believing place we are! – now we are teetering on the edge of an unpleasant confusion with conflicting opinion about so and so's life. What often times happens, don't you agree, is that rather than debate about the matter we turn the conversation to the weather, or sports or shopping. And so we duck the whole question of "what does it mean to say so and so believes?"

That is the question we are wrestling with regarding these Jews you see in the thirty first verse. It says to us, "*So Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him...*" So we say, "O, a bunch of Jews that are already becoming Christians!" Then Jesus proceeds to call them the sons of the devil. Did you notice that?

We practice avoidance, but avoidance is not wise. The difficulties with following through on the question of so and so's belief are diverse. Why do we avoid them? By observation both of my own heart and of others' is that we fear becoming entangled in the life of the other person. If we look too closely we may discover things are amiss, that there are things lacking. Suddenly we may realize that as we have looked closely maybe there is something we need to do. We would rather not look that closely. We fear that not only may we have to do something, but we realize it's going to put pressure on our time; indeed it might put pressure on our wallets, it might interrupt our plans. That is our fear of entanglement. But there is also a different kind of fear in pursuing these kinds of conversation. That is the fear that we may in fact become convicted and realize that as we push in and examine the faith life, what

goes behind the statement “he or she believes” and we begin to examine the Word of God to see what it is they are supposed to believe, we fall under conviction realizing our own lives fall terribly short. We would just as soon not go down that road. There are reasons why it is easier to live in a world of surfaces and appearances only.

Unfortunately for such an attitude the world is not simple. The world is sinful, and sin is [nothing] if not massively complicating. This is what we see in the Jews who believe in Jesus. If we are going to understand Jesus’ words with them we need to realize He is intending to catch them out. He intends to expose them, because He knows that until that happens they will remain stuck inside the illusions and self-deception by which they are living. After all, this is what it means to say that if they come to know the truth, the truth will set us free. We are freed from living in a world of pretense.

One way or another a group of scribes and Pharisees have made known that they believe in Jesus. We are not told what it is they believe. That has been my point up till now, to say to you all, “Join me in recognizing that that statement in verse 31 is utterly empty of any content other than that in some way and some level these people have a positive attitude toward Jesus. And may I say that there are many people today who, when you hear them say, “I believe in Jesus”, that is all they mean. Well, what is it [those Jews] probably believed? We can surmise what they believe based upon other things that have been said to us. I think it would be completely safe to say that they recognize that Jesus is commissioned by God and that He has what you and I would call an anointing of the Holy Spirit. And they believe that He is empowered by God. This is what Nicodemus had said already, that the Pharisees knew this was true about Jesus: commissioned by God and empowered by God to do these remarkable miracles, these wonderful works that He had done. I suspect they believe that He has a message from God. But that is not all that they would believe. There are some additional things that I think we can be pretty sure they believe, being smart people who have learned to survive in the world. I think that they probably believed that Jesus has more favor with God than the leaders of the current religious establishment, because of course they are not fools and they know that to say, “I believe in Jesus” is to draw a line and begin to separate themselves from the official establishment running the church in Israel. They probably also believe that it is Jesus who is becoming increasingly popular with the multitude and beginning perhaps to overshadow the popularity of the religious leadership. These are scribes and Pharisees. Their lives were closely associated with the people at large. They were in fact the religious leaders of the popular culture. We can be pretty sure that they were anxious to ensure the continuance of their place in Israel. They probably believed that Jesus in fact was the “wave of the future.” That is why they would be willing to take the risk of identifying with a controversial figure under the supposition that by doing so they were identifying with something good, possibly even God-sent and they were prepared therefore either to stand with Jesus or have Jesus stand with them, as long as this would continue the necessary continuance of their place in taking care of others.

What I have sort of stretched out in front of you is not conversion; it is calculation. It is not a sudden conviction brought on by the power of the Holy Spirit penetrating the heart, bringing conviction of personal corruption [as you are] standing before a Holy God and the desperate need for a savior and a recognition that this particular individual has been sent by God in order to lay down His sinless life in order that my sins could be atoned for before this holy God Who demands that kind of sacrifice for sin. That is not what these people believed. They believed that there are a set of potential advantages to identifying with Jesus.

To expose – that is what Jesus wants to do – to expose the true condition of their souls, Jesus could have said to them, “Listen, if you believe in Me, this is what you must do: you must die.” That, after all, is what He says in Matthew 16:24-26, “...*Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?’*” Jesus doesn’t say that here, He said it in Matthew. Let’s go back and see what Jesus did say at John

8:32. He says, “*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples...*” You and I [are perhaps inclined to think] “disciples, discipleship: I know what that is all about.” The ancients knew more about discipleship than we do. Discipling was at the core of most of ancient cultures. What did it mean to be a disciple? To be a disciple you were the person who patterned your life in all of its aspects after the master so your life would reflect [his]. You were in fact to become so much like him [that] you became the same so that to know the one was to know the other. This is what Jesus meant when He said that the disciple is not greater than the master, and He also said, if they will persecute me they will also persecute you all. So you have to understand the close identification that was assumed. When Jesus said, “OK, you want to be one of My disciples?” they all would have said, “But of course!”

So we go to the next phrase to see if there is something there that might have sparked the following conversation. “...and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” is how Jesus’ statement continues. Even here the first of the two clauses would have caused no stir for it was part of the general truth in the ancient world that truth was grounded in and learned through personal experience. Abstract or theoretical learning is really a product of modernity. In traditional cultures predominantly they understood that education was the fruit of an apprenticing relationship as you drew close to and followed after a master. Most often it was the father who apprenticed, passed on the wisdom to his sons, and the mother did the same for the daughters. The notion of truth coming out of discipleship would have [evoked from them] an, “of course!”

So we come down to the last concept: freedom. It is to the word “freedom” that they respond. The scribes and Pharisees got this at once, but their response may strike us as a bit off the point, saying, “Hey, we are the sons of Abraham. We have never been slaves.” You think to yourself, “That is just not an American thing to do.” So what are they doing? How can they possibly say they have never been enslaved? At this very moment they are an occupied country under the power of the Romans. They have come from slavery in Egypt: that is the beginning of their nation. They have been enslaved by the Babylonians. They have been enslaved by the Assyrians. When you read some of the other [Old Testament books] like Ezra and Nehemiah, you realize that many Israelites were captured and enslaved by their neighbors, for Nehemiah was trying to buy them back. What were these men saying? According to the Mosaic covenant Jews could have slaves but they could not be slaves. So what they are doing is, they are saying “We are members of the covenant people of God. And we, being the covenant people of God stand in a relationship of freedom with God and amongst each other as God’s people.” That is a good response. It is not true [of them], but it is good.

Jesus hears them, having had Himself something to do with the covenant they are talking about. He assures them He knows they are the children of Abraham. But look now at verse 34, “*Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.’*” What does Jesus do with His answer? “Let Me put My finger on the moral condition of your hearts. Let Me shift this conversation from the externalities of covenant to the internalities, the insiderness of your real condition in how you make choices and what your life then means.” It is not political, civil or economic relations; it is the spiritual and moral condition of the heart and the mind [that determines personal freedom.] “*Truly, truly, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin*”

You and I can listen to that and we say, “Jesus is so right on!” Do you know why we can do that? [It is] because we do not believe it. We do not believe what Jesus has just said. We deny it. We say, “O, well of course you need to understand that Jesus is speaking hyperbolically, He is making a BIG statement in order to capture our attention. But He doesn’t actually mean what He said. “You know, I sin in a technical sense now and then, in a small way; I fall short, it is true. But I am not a slave to sin! I mean, I’m the pastor of the church: come on!” We don’t believe what Jesus says. “You know, I’m ok, I am in charge of my life; I have got things under control. I’m free to come and go. I do good and sometimes not quite so good.” And that’s how most of us reason.

What we don't come to grips with is what it means to not sin. A sinner is not a righteous person who occasionally slips. A sinner is a person who sins because sinning is the natural orientation of their soul, so that to not sin is something extraordinary. We have it all the other way around, don't we? We look over our lives and say, "Occasionally I do the wrong thing," and then we give ourselves a pat on our back for being fundamentally good folk. But if we let the Word speak to us, and if we recognize that sin is something that rises out from the deepest part of what we are, we realize that when I do not sin, when I manage to act in true, uncluttered, unburdened, uncompromised faith in God, something extraordinary has happened. Scripture tells us what that extraordinary thing is: it is when we have our hearts and minds focused on Jesus Christ and we sense the power of the Holy Spirit within us clearing away that which is unworthy and drawing us to that which is reflective of God. The apostle Paul gives the same teaching in slightly expanded form. I encourage you to turn to Romans 6:15-19. Paul says this:

"What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present – do you notice the [present] tense? It is time [for anyone of us] to do this – your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification."

Paul's teaching here clarifies the matter as an ongoing reality of Christian living. He is speaking about what it means to abide in Christ. How [is this done]? [It is done] in two ways. The first is to present yourself as a slave to Jesus Christ. Last week we saw that it is essential for faith to move from knowing about Jesus to knowing Him personally. Now what we recognize is that to know Jesus personally I need to be a slave, because that's what Jesus says. Jesus wants to be and He needs to be both our master and our friend. You and I do not define the relationship that we will have with Him. He says, "I will be your friend and master or you are a disobedient slave." By the way, you're not a non-slave, you are a bad slave. The second thing [is that] as our master and our friend He has given to us a standard of teaching to which our lives are to conform.

In the Christian walk there are two equally disastrous errors. The first is to try and live by the standard without being a slave of Jesus. That is a disaster because it leads to legalism. We will necessarily reshape the standard to fit our abilities. Remember, what does it take to not sin? It takes the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit for one who is, according to Hebrews 12, keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus. The other error is to try and live with just Jesus alone. The problem with this is that if I try to live with Jesus and ignore the standard, I am ignoring the standard that Jesus has given to me. So what I must do in order to do that is I must suppress the knowledge of the truth in a lack of faith or unrighteousness. This is inescapable; there is nothing you can do about this. The motto, "Just give me Jesus" does not work.

We begin here to see the centrality of the truth of Jesus' resurrection. It is not just in reference to His death and resurrection for our sins. As it says in Hebrews, so that we understand and appreciate that He ever lives to make intercession for us at the Father's throne. Here is the fact: every time any one of us chooses to sin we are in grave peril of returning to the slavery to sin which held us before we were saved by grace. I am not saying you lose your salvation; but I am saying you fall out of favor with God and come under his wrath and His anger because you are violating his standards and you are saying no to his Son. You are giving yourself over to the service of that which is unworthy and corrupting and defiling. That is why the promise that we have at a place like I John 1:9 is so critical. *"If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

Beloved if you understand what Jesus is saying to those Jews and what the Word of God is saying to us about the realities of sin and slavery, truth and freedom, that verse should make your heart leap for joy.

We have looked today at a little bit of what Jesus had to say. We have certainly not covered all that He has to say. Let me close with the closing section of verse 34. “*The slave does not stay in the house forever. The son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are really free.*” Beloved, our freedom from sin’s power is entirely dependent on the fact that our freedom is a gift from the eternal Son of God. I urge you: stop playing around, recognize sin is really about and what it takes to be a child of God and to glorify Him.

Please pray with me: gracious heavenly Father, the world would have us live no more than skin deep. O so often we are willing to do so. We are not used to the deeper things, not of Your Words so much as of our own lives. Forgive us. Teach us to trust more fully both in Your grace and in the presence of Your Spirit in the hearts and minds of our fellow believers so we can encourage one another and we can bear witness to the wilderness of the amazing and liberating truth of God. It is in His name that we pray, Father. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. What does it mean to say a person believes? What is freedom or under what conditions is a person free? What is the relationship between truth and freedom? What is the relationship between sin, slavery, truth and freedom,”
2. According to the dictionary faith is “unquestioning belief”. Do you agree or disagree? How does Jesus comment on the faith of a child fit into your understanding?
3. What is distinctive about “saving faith” compared with all the rest?
4. Why do we tend to avoid serious spiritually centered conversations?
5. What motives are there for associating with Christians or joining a church other than Biblical motives?
6. What is the difference between calculation and conversion when it comes to matters of faith?
7. How do you define the word “freedom”?
8. “A sinner is not a righteous person who occasionally slips; a sinner is a person who sins because sinning is the natural orientation of his soul.” Is this true? Is it equally true of those who are saved?
9. What is the trap of legalism? Why is it not sufficient to live by the motto, “Just give me Jesus”?