

John 8:31-59

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and 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, "You will be made free"?'

Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. 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. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.' They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.'

The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?' Jesus answered, 'I do not have a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge. Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.' The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, "Whoever keeps my word will never taste death." Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?' Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, "He is our God", though you do not know him. But I know him; if I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.' Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Made to be Free

Today we begin a new, three-week worship series entitled, "It's Awesome to Be Me," which sounds like a very boastful thing to say, but it's true, not just about me but about every one of us. And I don't mean it so much as a compliment to ourselves but as a compliment to the one who created us. The psalmist writes, "I praise you (God) because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. It is awesome to be me, just as it's awesome to be you, because of God who made us to be

awesome. And today we'll explore how we were made to be free, which is appropriate on the 4th of July weekend as we celebrate our freedom as a nation.

What I used to love about the 4th of July was the barbecues. I remember going to barbecues where there was lots of food and beer and music and usually a swimming pool. Fourth of July barbecues were better than Super Bowl parties because the weather was nicer and we weren't all glued to the TV. In fact they were a lot like heaven, or how I envisioned heaven, because it was a non-religious heaven. I don't remember ever saying prayers or singing hymns on the Fourth of July – it was a very secular holiday that had nothing it seems to do with God.

In fact those Fourth of July Barbecues seemed to have very little to do with freedom, but deep down they really *were* about freedom, because one of the most memorable lines that Thomas Jefferson penned into the Declaration of Independence had to do with our right to pursue happiness, and Fourth of July barbecues were certainly places where people pursued happiness. So in a way Fourth of July barbecues are celebrations of our freedom.

They're not the only celebrations of our freedom. Whenever we exercise our rights as American citizens we celebrate our freedom whether we're conscious of it or not. When I bought my airline ticket for Haiti I celebrated my freedom; not everyone in the world can travel to a foreign country. When I buy a book like *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* I celebrate my freedom, because not everyone has the freedom to buy a book about God or religion. And the freedom that we experience when we exercise our rights as Americans is a way we have of pursuing happiness.

We're pretty happy as a country. Is everyone here happy? Probably a lot happier since we're in an air conditioned room. I think we are pretty happy as a people, and the fact that so many people *want* to live in America is evidence of that; they want to be happy, too. They want to feel safe. They want to live in a land where there is some level of justice, where there are opportunities to work and provide for families, where we can even earn enough money throw of Fourth of July barbecue. One can be quite happy in this country.

And that is enough for most people, to go through life working and playing and living with a decent level of freedom. Most people do that without any need for God or religion; in fact many folks think God and religion put restrictions on their freedom. "Uh...I can't go the beach today; I have to go to *church*." "Oh, I can't go to that club because I'm a Christian." It's true; very often people think of their faith as a ball and chain around their ankles.

And yet in today's reading Jesus tells us that when we follow his word we are free, not chained or confined but completely, *perfectly* free, free from two things in particular that the Declaration of Independence could never offer us. In Jesus we are free from *sin* and from *death*; Jesus says that if we sin we are slaves to sin, and those who keep his word will never taste death. I want us to look at this kind of freedom that Jesus is offering us today, particularly to see how *freedom from sin* and *freedom from death* relate to one another.

And I want to start by talking about *death*. Death is something *we* don't usually want to talk about; if you go to a Fourth of July barbecue and there's some person who's talking about death,

chances are that person is going to be standing alone eventually. Part of our pursuit of happiness that we exercise at a Fourth of July barbecue entails *avoiding conversations about death*. We want to talk about *life*, about the things we did, the things we're doing, and the things we plan to do. We don't want to talk about all that good stuff *ending*. But death is something that we can't seem to escape, so at some point we *have* to talk about it. Because it's something we can't avoid, and because it's something that confines us we are in fact *slaves* to death. Yet Jesus promises that those who follow his word will not taste death. *Those who are truly free in Christ are freed from death.*

And that's something that is very appealing to people. It's a major selling point of the Christian faith, right? If you believe in Jesus you have eternal life; "Great! Where do I sign up?" I don't want to die, so I'll believe in Jesus and have life everlasting.

The problem is that *life everlasting by itself* is not a guarantee of happiness, is it? I was watching a *Doctor Who* episode where one character is given eternal life and in a few hundred years she wants her life to end! Why? Because life has lost its meaning to her. If you are the *only one* who lives forever, then you are going to see a lot of people you love die, and we know how that feels. It hurts. You spend many years of your life building these friendships, these relationships, and death comes along and ruins it. So if you are the only person who lives forever, the only way you can avoid that pain is to either die yourself or stop loving people. Some people do that; they stop loving people. If you fall in love only to have that person die, then fall in love again and have *that* person die, and on and on and on, you may eventually stop falling in love. You may eventually have *no* feelings rather than *loving* someone. But what will become of you if you stop loving people? What happiness will you draw from life? Probably none. In this *Doctor Who* episode this woman with eternal life had become a robber. She stopped caring about people because if she cared she would love and she would get hurt, so she decided to not care.

That's a problem with being created in God's image, to love and be loved. When we love people who die there is pain. But do we want to abandon love? Certainly not! Which brings me to that second freedom that Jesus talks about; freedom from *sin*. What is sin? Some people try to define it by creating a list of laws – that's what Jesus is criticizing in today's lesson. The Jews that he is talking to have done just that; they have defined sin according to a bunch of rules, and they think that if they obey all those rules that they are not sinning, and thus they are righteous. There is a much simpler way of defining sin, but that definition exposes us to the truth that sin is not such an easy thing to overcome. **Sin is anything that is not love.** All those laws, all those commandments, are really just pointing to examples of how we fail to love. *Thou shall not steal*; stealing is failure to love. *Thou shall honor thy father and mother*; failing to honor father and mother is failing to love. Jesus wants us to be free from sin which means we are free to love, to love God and others. But then we run into that dilemma; if we are free from sin, then we love. And if we love, we feel pain when someone dies. It seems that God is very cruel by creating us to love, commanding us to love, and then allowing us to die, thus bringing us grief and pain.

And the only way out of that dilemma in a way that allows us to preserve our love for God and for others is to have faith in eternal life, not only for ourselves but for others as well. That is how Jesus describes the Kingdom of God. It is a place where God and God's creation live in love of

one another eternally. It is a place of no sin – we're in a place where love rules – and a place of no death – neither for us nor for others, therefore it is true happiness.

Yet all this would only be theory were it not for the Resurrection of Jesus. It's nice to talk about heaven and eternal life, but at the end of the day it would all be mere conjecture were it not for the witness of Mary Magdalene and Peter and John and Paul and so many others whose world was rocked by the appearance of Jesus alive on the third day after his death. That is the cornerstone of our faith, because without Easter it's very hard to believe Jesus when he says that those who keep his word will never taste death. Because of the Resurrection, we trust in Jesus' words, and we strive to be free of sin, to love God and love others and to exercise true freedom the way God intends us to.

In every sermon I give I'm very conscious of our need to have a vision for this church. I've offered you the very general vision of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, a kingdom where we live in true freedom as God intends for us to live. And you know that we can only live in that state of perfect freedom when we are perfected in love. And so the specific vision for Bethel Church requires us to ask the question, "How do we express perfect love to this community?" One way we've talked about is being radically welcoming, which means that we eliminate any barrier that would discourage a person from coming here – not only removing discriminatory policies but eliminating our pride that makes us insist on having things our own way, eliminating our indifference to the struggles of those who have disabilities and find it hard to come to our church. If we truly desire to live in that freedom that Jesus talks about, we have to break those barriers to true love, so that others can experience God's love and come to know that perfect freedom as well. May God inspire us to truly live in the freedom for which he created us.