

What does it mean to be made free? How does Jesus make us free?

Our gospel reading today starts with Jesus in conversation with some of his followers, those early Jewish-Christian believers. He tells them, "If you continue to follow my teachings, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

And immediately their minds go to the political definitions of freedom and slavery. "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been slaves to anyone."

Well — first — maybe Jesus' listeners were not personally enslaved by anyone in the literal sense, but historically yes, they had been slaves. Have they forgotten their ancestors' years of slavery in Egypt? And the God who freed them?

So Jesus clarifies for them. Jesus tells them, "You *are* slaves to sin; but the Son can make you free, and give you a permanent home in the house of God."

This is really a question of identity. Jesus' followers have a case of mistaken identity. They forget that they were descended from slaves, who were made free by God. And they think they are now free.

And Jesus says, "No, that's not the case. You are slaves: you are slaves to sin. But I can give make you like a son or a daughter in God's household, and I can free you from being a slave to sin."

So what Jesus is promising is an identity shift. Jesus promises they — and we — can see the truth of our slavery to sin, and that Jesus can make us like a son or a daughter, a beloved child with a permanent place in God's household, rather than a people who are controlled by sin.

Jesus is trying to get them to see themselves differently: to see that first, yes, they DO have a problem, they ARE enslaved to something, their belief that they are free is an illusion. They are controlled by sin.

And then Jesus wants them to understand that he can give people an identity shift: from being blindly controlled by sin, to being consciously freed in Christ.

Now for a moment, let's go from cosmic questions of sin and salvation — we'll get back to that — and talk about how identity shifts work in our day-to-day lives, and I'm going to pick on myself as an example here.

You know that visit with the doctor — or maybe you haven't had that one yet — but that visit, where the doctor looks at you and says, "The party's over, you need to change your ways" — that's the one.

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I had that visit a few years ago, and one of the things the doctor said was that I really, really needed to exercise every day, which did not mean picking up the remote and changing what's on Netflix. When I called my father to whine about this, because — like Jesus' followers who did not see that they needed to be free — I did not see the need to buy athletic shoes, ever — my dad said, "Welcome to your fifties."

Well, here's the thing. Some people love exercise. Some people hate exercise. All my life, I have really had to motivate myself to get moving. I've had to change my habits to include exercise.

But first, I needed to make a shift in how I saw myself. I could no longer keep telling myself a story that I liked, but that was not in my best interest -- "I'm the great indoorswoman, I hate exercise." Saying that about myself made it a lot harder for me to live a different way. I had to stop saying that, and try on a new identity. Now, I'm not quite ready to say I'll ever be an athlete, but I now tell myself, "I am a person who moves every day, I get out there, and I am active every day."

Now, what helped me a little with this is that back in the 1900s I managed a clinical trial site where we were helping people to quit smoking cigarettes. It is very difficult to quit smoking. For most people it takes seven or eight serious tries before it works. Setting aside the fact that nicotine is addictive, quitting smoking is in part also an identity issue.

You see, at some point, a person who wants to quit smoking has to stop thinking of themselves as smokers. That identity -- "I am a smoker" -- at some point that story has got to go, and the person has to start seeing themselves as a non-smoker.

A non-smoker is someone who, when offered a cigarette, says, "No thanks, I don't smoke."

It's an identity shift. And it takes time to make that shift, we have to be patient with ourselves, like God is patient with us.

It has been awkward for me to go from saying, "I hate exercise," to "I make the time to move every day."

But that kind of identity shift, in a much more profoundly theological way, is what Jesus is talking about.

First, Jesus tells his followers they have a case of mistaken identity. They are telling themselves a story that is not true about their situation. They need to see the situation clearly! They need to see the truth, in order to be set free! They don't think they are slaves, they think they are already free. But Jesus says, "No, you are not free right now. Anyone who sins is a slave to sin."

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Then Jesus points out that slaves don't get to say where they live, they may be forced at any time to leave the household. A slave is always under the control of someone else.

But Jesus goes on to say, "But the Son of the household, has a place there forever. And the Son has the power to set you free."

It's an identity shift! Jesus promises his followers, if you continue in my Word, if you stick with me, you abide with me, I can set you free from what controls you without your even knowing it.

Jesus offers us both the truth – that we are controlled by sin – and Jesus offers us this identity shift – that Jesus can bring us into the household of God, as free people, God's children; as people who know the truth, as people who are set free.

But here is the problem with the freedom that Jesus offers. It means you have to make an identity shift. Which means change.

As a previously sedentary person, I had to make an identity shift: I'm now someone who does something active every day (although you notice I still don't use that e-word, "exercise"). A smoker who wants to be a non-smoker has to make an identity shift — "I'm a person who does not smoke."

Freedom means change, and change nearly always means identity shifts. If we see ourselves as being freed by Christ to be full members of God's household, the children of God, who *belong* with God, that means change.

Being freed by Christ means that means we do not waste time ruminating about whether or not we are saved, and we start doing things a little differently. We start to live into that Word and that Truth and that Freedom that is the very nature of Christ. This means that things WILL change in our lives.

This October 25, we celebrate Reformation Sunday.

The sixteenth-century reformers too had to make a major identity shift. They had to change from identifying themselves with the only church they had ever known, the only source of Christian teaching they had ever known, to seeing themselves as followers of Jesus inspired by the Holy Spirit to find other ways they could faithfully gather and preach and teach and serve and share and live out the love of God in Christ.

So: what's your identity? Truthfully?

Who are you? What kind of person are you?

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What if you look in the mirror and try this one on for size: "I am a person who has been set free by Jesus Christ."

What are you freed of?

What are you freed for?

And what, if anything, is blocking you from feeling free?

The followers of Jesus in this story were not aware of what was controlling them. Jesus helped them to become aware, and that awareness shows them -- and us -- our need for Christ. And that brings us right back to the promise Jesus makes that begins this reading: Jesus tells them, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

The truth is, without Christ we are bound to sin and cannot free ourselves -- but Jesus has already freed us from all that.

But do you *know* that? And what difference does being freed by Christ make in your life?

If you can see yourself as someone who is both already freed by Christ AND as someone in the process of growing into greater truth, greater awareness, greater freedom in Christ, every day, this truth has the potential to change everything for you.

Because freedom in this lifetime is never a done deal, is it? What good is it that Christ has freed you, if you don't see it? What good is it that Christ continues to work in you, if you are not aware of this? Jesus grows us into that: Jesus helps us make that identity shift.

As Jesus promised in today's reading, when we continue in his word, we will truly be his disciples, and we will be made free. Being made free is both a done deal -- Jesus saved us all 2,000 years ago -- and a process -- the living Christ promises to guide and grow each one of us, every day.

What is it that you need to be freed from, today? What needs to be changed or healed for you, today?

Whatever that is, God in Christ Jesus can work with that! To see yourself differently, to try new things, to act differently -- that's a process. It's like quitting smoking, or learning to exercise on a regular basis.

The writer Maya Angelou said, "When you know better, you do better." And in this lifetime we know better and we grow -- we "do better" -- by following Jesus and abiding in his word, which allows Jesus

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to continue to shape us, to grow us into people who can carry that great gift of freedom for ourselves, and for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of all who continue to struggle to be made free. We are made free to share God's love. We are made free to share God's peace, God's justice, and God's goodness.

On this Reformation Sunday, I'd like to leave you with the words of Martin Luther about this ongoing, life-long process of being freed by Christ.

"This life, therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the end, but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed."\*

It is in process!

Jesus meets us where we are, but Jesus doesn't leave us where he found us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

\*Quoted from the "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther which were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull (1520)," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Volume 32, pp 20-24.

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