



October 22, 2017

FREE TO LIVE A LIFE THAT MATTERS
Pastor Vern Christopherson

JOHN 8:31-36 NRSV

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

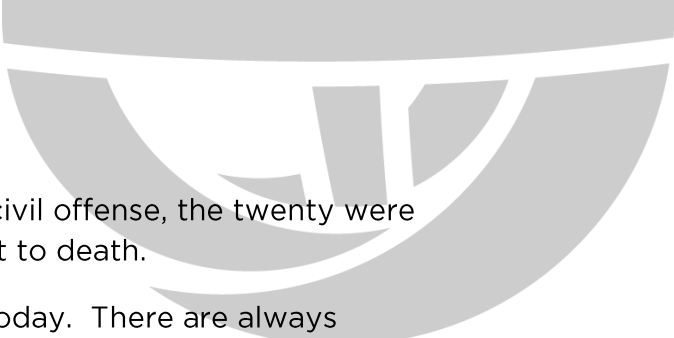
³³They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free?'"

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

I was in Boston last weekend with my family. If you've ever been to Boston, you probably checked out the Freedom Trail. We certainly did. We heard the story of Paul Revere and the lanterns in the steeple of the Old North Church. *The British are coming, the British are coming...* one if by land, two if by sea. We toured the U.S.S. Constitution, also known as "Old Ironsides." The ship was constructed out of sturdy oak. British cannon balls bounced off the sides of the rugged ship and barely made a dent. We went to Bunker Hill, the site of the first major battle of the Revolutionary War. The British won the battle, but it strengthened the resolve of the Patriots to win the war. These stories and more were incredibly stirring. They drove home the point that freedom is costly. Our ancestors paid for it with sweat and sacrifice and blood.

Our time in Boston also drove home the point that freedom can be complicated. One person's freedom can be another person's oppression. Groups like the Pilgrims and the Puritans came to America hoping to escape religious persecution. But in the process, they sometimes imposed their own brand of intolerance. We visited Salem where the infamous witch trials took place in the late 1600s. Hundreds of suspects were arrested. Twenty of them were executed, most with



very little evidence. Because witchcraft was only a civil offense, the twenty were ultimately charged with treason so they could be put to death.

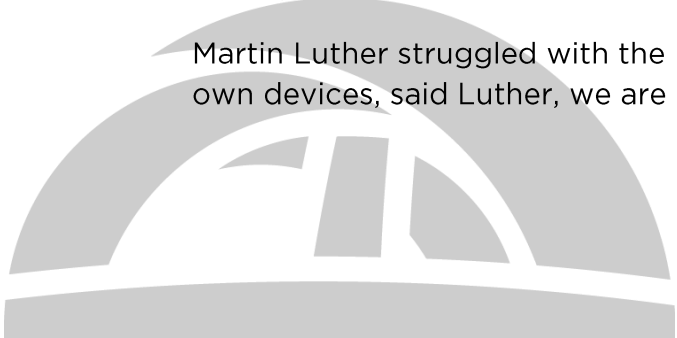
Freedom is probably no less costly or complicated today. There are always competing interests to weigh. Should NFL owners force their players to stand for the national anthem – or should they let them kneel as an expression of their first amendment rights? Should people like Stephen Paddock be allowed to buy any and all the guns they want, and then convert them with bump stocks into automatic rifles – or is this too great a threat to the public? Should a conservative Christian baker be free to not bake a wedding cake for a gay couple – or is this yet another example of discrimination? These are important questions. They're worthy of deep conversations. Freedom is costly and it's complicated.

The issue of freedom comes up in the gospel of John. There's a conflict in the local synagogue between those Jews who believe that Jesus is the messiah, and those who don't. Over time, the conflict has grown to the point where the leaders of the synagogue are hostile toward Jesus' followers. Eventually they will expel them from the synagogue, claiming they are not true children of Abraham.

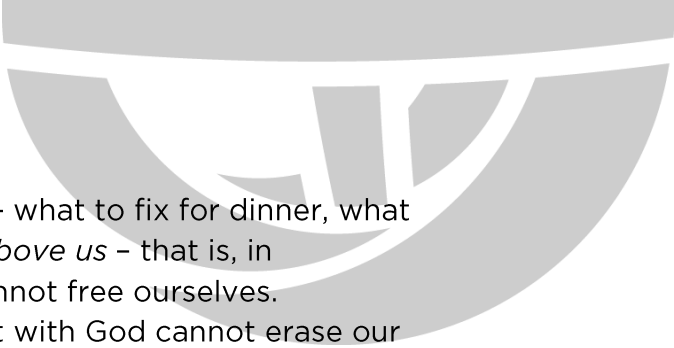
In this week's reading, Jesus seems to be speaking to a group of his followers who are sitting on the fence. They have previously professed faith in him, but now they are not so sure. The simmering controversy with the synagogue has made them anxious and fearful. Jesus attempts to reassure them: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Like a lot of conversations in John, this one is full of twists and turns. Jesus' listeners respond: "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been in bondage to anyone." This is a curious thing to say, because their ancestors spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt; and another 50 years in exile in Babylon; and even now the country is occupied by Rome. Perhaps they are too caught up in their national identity, as if being God's chosen people somehow guarantees their claim to freedom.

Jesus shifts the conversation from politics to their personal lives: "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Maybe they're not as free as they think they are. Maybe a life alienated from God has a way of going from bad to worse – for them and for us. Ask someone caught up in an opioid addiction. Ask someone who can't stop hoarding. Ask Harvey Weinstein, or better yet, ask one of the dozens of women who've accused him of sexual assault. When life is going from bad to worse, it can feel like there's no way out.



Martin Luther struggled with the reality of sin in his life. When we are left to our own devices, said Luther, we are not truly free. Oh, we have a certain freedom



from below when it comes to our everyday choices – what to fix for dinner, what kind of car to drive. But when it comes to matters *above us* – that is, in relationship to God – sin holds us captive and we cannot free ourselves. According to Luther, our efforts to make things right with God cannot erase our past mistakes. God has to make the first move.


We see this first move as Jesus makes a final comment to those sitting on the fence: “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” This is a critical juncture. Freedom doesn’t come from trying really hard to be good people. It doesn’t come from believing all the right things. Rather it comes in the person of Jesus. God has already made the first move in him. “Do you know me?” Jesus asks people again and again in the gospel of John. “Do you want to be my disciples? If so, then come to me. Stay connected with me. You will know how much I love you. And you will be free to live a life that matters.”

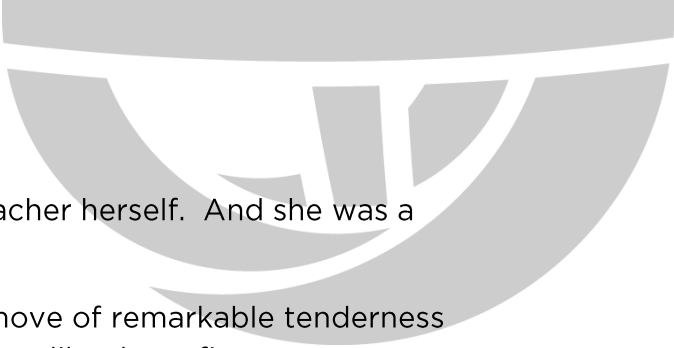
In a book called *The Whisper Test*, Mary Ann Bird tells the story of how God made the first move toward her. It came through the kindness of a teacher. Mary Ann was born with multiple birth defects. She was deaf in one ear. She had a cleft palate, a disfigured face, and a crooked nose. As a child, she suffered not only physical impairments but also the emotional damage inflicted by other children. “Oh, Mary Ann,” her classmates would say, “What happened to your lip?” “I cut it on a piece of glass,” she fibbed.

One of the worst experiences at school was the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk. The child would first cover one ear, and then the other. The teacher would whisper something like, “the sky is blue” or “you have new shoes.” This was the whisper test. If the teacher’s words were heard and repeated, the child passed the test. To avoid humiliation, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her good ear so she could hear what the teacher was saying.

One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school. Every student, including Mary Ann, wanted to be noticed by her. Then the day of the dreaded hearing test arrived. When Mary Ann’s turn came, she was called to the teacher’s desk. As she cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper something. “I waited for those words,” Mary Ann said, “words which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life.” Miss Leonard did not say, “The sky is blue” or “you have new shoes.” What she whispered instead was, “I wish you were my little girl.”

Miss Leonard made the first move. She spoke words of remarkable tenderness and love. She set Mary Ann free from doubt and shame. In the process, she





changed her life. Mary Ann went on to become a teacher herself. And she was a person of inner beauty and great kindness.

God makes the first move toward us in Jesus. It's a move of remarkable tenderness and love. It doesn't matter if we're sitting on the fence, like those first-century Christians expelled from the synagogue. It doesn't matter if we doubt that we can ever truly measure up, like Martin Luther early in his life. It doesn't matter if we feel wounded and unlovable, like Mary Ann Bird. God comes to us wherever we are, and God says, "I wish you were my little child."

This is good news, don't you think? If the Son makes us free, we will be free indeed. This freedom is costly - involving a cross. And it's complicated - calling you and me to a life a discipleship. At the heart of it, this discipleship is not about being really good people, or about believing all the right things. Rather, it's about a journey with Jesus, and putting our trust in him.

Rest assured, as we do this, we are free to live a life that matters. Amen.

