

In Christ. I am Free!

John 8: 31-36

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Today, we celebrate our "Freedom" in Christ, reclaimed during the reformation to shape our church as a place of compassionate grace and hope. We also continue to share stories of compassion that invite us to live fully and freely as children of God. Each of you should be holding onto a rock that you picked up at the beginning of the service. As I share today's message, let that rock represent something in your own story. For we all have stories, and they change and ebb and flow through our lives, teaching us not only who we are, but who God is, and what it means that he sent his Son Jesus to set us free. I am going to share a series of stories with you this morning, and I trust that somewhere in the midst of them...your story will connect.

In a novel I read years ago, there was a story about what heaven may be like. The story has always stayed with me. It goes like this: A man died and woke up in a lovely green room. He was all by himself and looked around wondering where he was, and how he came to be here. A knock on the door brought him to his feet, and he opened it to discover a friend who had died and gone to heaven years before. "I am sent to be your guide," his friend said, "and I can answer all your questions and give you a tour of any parts of heaven you are ready to see. However, he, continued, we humans tend to get overwhelmed if we take in heaven too quickly, so I will bring you back to this room to rest and reflect until you are fully ready for all heaven has to offer." This sounded like a grand plan, so the man began to ask his guide all the questions that he had wondered about on earth, and then they took a walk outside the walls of the green room.

What they experienced was beyond anything this man could imagine. Amazingly beautiful colors, music, and joy without description. He saw children and energetic adults so filled with life and passion that the man could hardly wait to become fully like them. Yet, his guide cautioned, he needed to open to eternal life slowly, discovering more and more each day. One day, his eyes now adjusted to never-ending light, the man noticed that there were some strange looking garbage cans here and there among the majesty of God's kingdom. Their lids were on tight, and yet they emitted a funny sound, almost a buzzing noise. Curious, he began to ask his guide about these strange cans. His guide, however, grew sad and discouraged him from seeking an answer. But, the man being a very determined guy prevailed and so one day the guide allowed him to approach one of the cans and lift the lid to look inside.

What he saw made him draw back in fear, for inside were thousands of miniature humans buzzing around like aggressive bees in a hive. They crawled all over each other as if driven to do something, but he couldn't imagine what. Their frenzy was beyond description and he immediately felt this great sense of sadness and loss as he stared at this endless futility. "What is this?" he finally asked. His guide looked at him with great compassion and said, "I am afraid you are looking at hell. Those poor people can't stop grabbing and pushing for control long enough to realize just how close they are to their Father's love and promises. But God keeps them close, just in case they come to themselves and venture out into his grace."

This story may or may not be what heaven is like, but it surely reflects what life on this earth can be like. Every morning, we wake up and make a choice about how we will shape our story in the world. Will we see THIS day as an opportunity to venture into God's presence and listen for His creative, life-giving voice guiding us toward abundant life? Or will we be so focused on the raindrops, hardships, rock hard disappointments and losses that we retreat into fear?

John's gospel declares this truth: if Jesus Christ sets you free, you are free indeed! Freedom to live; freedom to be all that God created you to be and more. Free to SEE the glory of God's creation through eyes colored by grace and enlivened by hope and love. Free to embrace your personal gifts and callings with a passion to share them so that every other living being benefits from the purpose for which you were created. Free to BE rather than DO; to SOAR in JOY, rather than WALLOW in fear, sorrow, hang-ups or crippling hurts. THIS is truly what it means to be a child of God, AND a church set free by the Gospel to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Freedom, however, has a cost. We all know that, especially as we see refugees driven from their homes and desperate for a new place to live their lives and care for their families. God paid the ultimate cost when he gave Jesus over to the powers of darkness and fear so that the light of truth and freedom could be realized. Yet, I think that in every person, every family, every institution, the stories we live are the places in which freedom is born, and when they are stories filled with compassion, they bring new life that is not of this world, but of God's grace. Let me share a few stories with you now:

First...here is one from the Bible: There was a pious rich man who came to Jesus asking what he further needed to do to enter the kingdom of God. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, replied Jesus, and then come and follow me. The story ends in sadness, for the man had great human wealth and just could not let it go to enter into the potential of what Jesus was offering. The story ends there in the Bible, but the gospel writer sets us up to make it our own story, and calls us to consider how it will unfold in our own journey. Some, like Mother Teresa, have lived out Christ's invitation to

the max; others, have opened their hearts to strangers, and found a way to follow Jesus' example by touching lives with friendship and peace.

A second story comes from a well-known novel "To Kill a Mockingbird." Atticus is a southern lawyer who lives with his family in a racist southern town when slavery continued to rob people of freedom and life. Atticus heard God's call to use his passion and skill to defend a wrongly accused black man, knowing that the chance of winning was nil and the likelihood of violence was real. Three young children became his guide toward the light of justice and truth, and serve to bring grace into a community where fear continued to suppress love and life for all. Even in judicial defeat, a light of hope is ignited for all that are willing to see. Freedom becomes a pregnancy of hope, and birth is on the horizon.

A third story comes from real life from a young woman whose life went out of control. She turned to a program at her church called Celebrate Recovery, and found a pathway to freedom. From the time she was little, Katrina turned to perfectionism to prove and earn love from anyone who would give her attention. Her neediness often kept others from coming too close. So, Katrina created the illusion of a beautiful, happy and ideal life. As she grew into a young, married woman, the void she felt inside fueled love and relationship addictions that led to the destruction of her marriage. Katrina just couldn't get enough love and found it in all the wrong places. Broken and alone, Katrina finally turned to God, the only one whose promise to love her didn't run away, and she asked God to rescue her. He led her to a program at her church called Celebrate Recovery. A place where she could safely bring her deep hurts and the habits that destroyed her relationships, and find acceptance and hope. God wrapped His arms around her through this 12 step Christian-based program. It took awhile, but Kristina found hope, freedom and authentic love. In Christ, she was finally free to get the help she needed and saw herself as a valued child of God who was loveable as she was, and not as she felt she had to be.

And here are just a few more stories where the compassionate guide of God's Spirit called others to freedom:

Danny was a sensitive, creative child, and wounded at a young age by his parent's bitter divorce. While things were falling apart in his family, he learned to process feelings of hurt through anger, and bullying behaviors. He sought control over something in his life, and began a life long struggle with food addiction. longed for freedom from her hurts, hang-ups and habits. A friend invited him to Celebrate Recovery. He began a new journey in which his gifts for creativity and ability to empathize with others found a new purpose and direction. Danny would always fight his addictive behaviors, but the freedom he found in Christ helped him face each day with courage and hope.

And this story about the Murphy family: Co-dependency and dark secrets plagued the Murphy family, and they went back several generations. Grandpa Joe and aunt Helen were never spoken about. Everyone knew why, but never dared ask. The family rule was to put on masks of perfection and control even while dying bit by bit on the inside. The cycle of dysfunction created patterns of addiction, abuse, poor self-esteem and deep depression, and it just kept coming to the surface. Finally, a suicidal cousin dealing with drug addiction couldn't be hidden. Drawn into her therapy and struggle, they finally came to understand the depth and power their shame had over them as a family. Together, this family admitted they were powerless over their future and turned to Christ for forgiveness. They found transforming help in accepting God's freedom and love. Through a caring group of Christians that also named and claimed recovery from their own hurts and hang-ups and destructive habits, they found a path toward hope and recovery together.

And finally, the story of Shirley, a seemingly good "Christian girl," with a good upbringing: For reasons no one could understand, Shirley began compromising herself in high school to be accepted by her peers. She couldn't seem to set appropriate boundaries and often said yes when she should have said no. Depression became her friend and her escape, and then food. She would self-medicate by eating junk food until she became ill and extremely overweight. Her health began to be affected, yet Shirley couldn't stop. It was as if chocolate and chips were her god, and no diet or health plan had any power over her cravings. She felt lost and alone, and life didn't seem worth it. Shirley remembered the wonderful messages of love and acceptance she had heard in her church growing up. Could they be true for her now, when everything was so messed up? It took awhile, but Shirley got the courage to go back to church one Sunday morning. It was as if a flood of light entered her soul as she heard words of confession, forgiveness and the promise of new life. People cared...they seemed free and alive in a way she had forgotten existed. Oh, they weren't perfect, but they did welcome her and she felt she had finally come home. Like a prodigal child, she came back to herself and realized that her God had been waiting and watching for her all along. She could hardly wait to run back into his waiting arms.

I don't know if you related to any of these real life stories, but no doubt you CAN relate to having some of your own hurts...hang-ups...or habits that consume your energy; cloud your joy and keep you from knowing the freedom you can have in Christ. We ALL do...for as "We are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves!" But...in Christ, and by the powerful presence of His Holy Spirit as our guide, we can and do know the freedom of grace and the gift of transformed life. That is why we come into this place of worship, seeking wholeness and healing from the only source we can truly trust. The

one true Savior who as come into the world to take our hurts, hang-ups and debilitating habits to a cross and declare them finished!

As you came into worship today, you were each given a rock to hold in your hand. Lift it up and look at that rock right now. It is part of creation...a part of life. It is hard, perhaps rough, or smooth...made out of pressurized soil that over time has formed its shape, it's color, it's cracks and crevices. Think of this rock as that part of your human condition that has internalized moments when you have been hurt by life. Maybe intentionally, or unintentionally, but hurt and wounded in some way. See in this rock a hang-up you may be carrying around. Perhaps you haven't forgiven someone who hurt you, or perhaps you haven't forgiven yourself. Perhaps anger or bitterness or sorrow holds you bound to a place of hardness. See in this rock a habit you would like to be free from. Something you would like to push aside so that you could open up to new opportunities where grace abounds and joy returns.

This rock you are holding is NOT you! It just represents those hard human places of hurt...those troubling hang-ups that mess up your potential, and those habits that destroy your freedom and joy. And, because of Christ, you can let them go and be transformed. It sounds easy, doesn't it? And yet, I know that it's not...but it is the first step! And that is all God is asking of you. "Come onto me with all your heavy burdens and take MY yoke upon you...for my yoke is light!" You see, we DO have to do the work of walking a new path of recovery for whatever our hurts and hang-ups and habits might be, BUT, we don't have to do it alone!

How do I know this, you might ask? Well, perhaps some of you remember my own little story when about five years ago I came to a place in my life where I felt out of control, trembling in a wind of fear and emptiness following a crisis that almost took my husband's life. It wasn't the biggest hang-up in the world when you compare it to addiction or abuse, BUT, it was MY hurt and hang-up! I had to do something to fall into God's loving embrace and accept His guidance and presence in my life again, so do you know what I did? I jumped...no, I allowed myself to be thrown out of an airplane at 13,000 feet in a tandem skydiving adventure. Was I scared? You bet! Did I have to do this...well, no...BUT YES! Somehow in my spirit I needed to fall and trust that God would indeed catch me and start me on a new path of recovery, hope, change and authentic life again! So I jumped...and God showed up!

So, today, on this reformation Sunday, as we celebrate the freedom we truly have in Christ our Lord, I want to invite any of you would like, to bring your rock to this pool of water and let it go! Literally, let it symbolize for you a new beginning...a new walk within the freedom of your holy guide, the Spirit of Truth, and into the arms of other loving guides and friends who also have their own hurts and hang-ups to release.

Celebrate that in Christ there is not only forgiveness of sins, but recovery into a new way of living, FREE and alive! For in Christ, we ARE free! In Christ, we are REDEEMED! In Christ, we are being made new each and every day! Amen.