

Set Free to Love

Sermon by John Strommen on John 8:31-36 Feb. 19, 2017

Let me ask you a question: have you ever talked to someone who was obviously pre-occupied – enough so that you felt they weren't really there? Maybe they were just a self-absorbed person, or worrying about something, or wishing they were somewhere else, or maybe their preoccupation was that they wanted something from you. In any event, that person is not FREE to be with you or for you, as you are of secondary importance.

Today we're going to explore how freedom through Christ has great relevance to loving our neighbor.

"If the son - who is Jesus - makes you free, you will be free indeed." This is a core Bible passage for Christians and especially Lutherans. And make no mistake, the freedom that is promised and given by Jesus isn't just so you can go skipping among the lilies of the field, shouting "I'm free, I'm free!" although that's a pretty good idea in its own right.

Yes, God sets us free so that we might be fully human and fully alive, but also so that we might be free and present to love our neighbor, whoever they may be.

But let's go back to Jesus words, "the truth will make you free. The son will make you free." What does Jesus free us from? In Jesus' time, physical slavery was prevalent, but Jesus meant much more than that, expanding slavery to our inner life as well as outer. What kinds of things does Jesus free us from, things that preoccupy us and disconnect us with our neighbor?

There are so many things that enslave us and preoccupy us, and despite the omnipresence of social media, many of us are lonely and disconnected. You really see this played out nationally, too. As our text reminds us, "a slave does not have a permanent place in the house. But the son does. If the son makes you free, you will be free, indeed." Not just in the next life, you belong to a family in *this life*. God's family. Can we be set free to belong to a family with each other, to be present for one another? This is a promise from God.

Let's look more closely at three things that hold us captive.

"So what are we freed from?" When I asked this question at the book study last Wednesday, someone said, "Fear," and with conviction! A person can be fearful of so many things, and if you're afraid, you're not free to love your neighbor. This is why fear mongering is so dangerous. When we're taught or led to assume the worst about our neighbor, we're thinking only of ourselves and our security and not so much about the needs of our neighbor. For instance, many of you have heard of the statistics - true by the way - that show that Muslims living in America today are, per capita, quite a bit less likely to do us harm than non-Muslims. And yet if we are a captive to fear, it's very hard to love them, to listen to them, to give them a fair shake, because we're *not free*. And it leads us down an unfortunate path where we turn away refugees because of the one in a million chance one of them might do something to us...and meanwhile, these refugees are themselves *actual victims* of terrorism, every one of them.

And by the way, this is not just a critique of the current administration because we have been turning away Syrian refugees for several years now. Now it's being pushed to another level.

When we make an idol of security, we become a prisoner of our own fears. Knowing that we can't possibly eliminate the threat of something happening to us, we are invited to put our ultimate trust elsewhere.

Psalm 27 says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?"

Jesus taught us that *Perfect love casts out all fear*. And the thing about this kind of love is, it doesn't stop with you. It goes on to your neighbor, even *those* neighbors.

Second, there is death. When death has the final word with us, a person can be a slave to death before they even die.

There's a wonderful scene in the movie, "Moonstruck," where one of the subplots is the unfaithfulness of the men in the story. At one point, a matriarch in the story asks the man who is about to marry her daughter, "Why do men chase women? Why isn't one woman enough?"

After fumbling around a bit, he eventually says, "Because he fears death."

The truthfulness of it hits her and she says, "That's it! That's it. Thank you for answering my question."

When you fear death, you easily become narcissistic in a panicky sort of way. The clock is ticking, you better "get what you can while you can." Usually not a prescription for true love.

Or if it's not *fear* of death, perhaps we feel the weight of the meaninglessness of death. As the memorable Kansas song years put it back in the 70's, "All we are is dust in the wind." "If that's all there is," one might conclude, "I'm just going to make the best of it before I die."

When we are not free from death, we may not be so high minded about trying to serve our neighbor. More likely, we will objectify and use our neighbor.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will not die but have eternal life." How might that freedom help you love your neighbor?

The last form of captivity I want to look at is the captivity of having to justify ourselves, we who often live in the shame of feeling that, one way or another, we aren't good enough.

When Luther was busy reforming the western world with his ideas, none of his ideas were more powerful than this one: that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. This wasn't exactly what the predominant belief was at that time. Nor is it now. In Luther's time, it was believed that people needed God's grace, for sure, but once you were given that grace, you had better use it and

demonstrate that you were worthy of it. Use it or lose it! To use it meant that you would now have to do more good deeds than you did before. You would have to go to church and pray more often, that sort of thing. Would you have enough goodness to get you over the hump on judgment day? Well, that was a constant source of uncertainty. Have I done enough? It was also the main motivator for doing good deeds. I need the credits!

Does that sound like love to you?

But Luther said it is God's grace and that grace alone that saves us. It's a promise that we can count on. Our actions matter a lot, but they count nothing for our salvation. Unconditional grace is the only way we can have certainty in this regard and be free.

So Luther was attacked in the following way: if there is nothing we have to do to be saved, and salvation is a gift, what motivation do we have to do anything good? Why would anyone love their neighbor? They're already "in." They don't need any more credits. You see, to medieval Catholicism, the neighbor was very important all right. He or she was a source for accumulating credit. In fact, and this is well documented, there were times during Luther's era when someone would put forward a plan to eliminate the widespread poverty in Rome, in other words, to do justice. But the Pope resisted. Why? If you eliminated poverty, you would eliminate the opportunity to give alms to the poor and for merits to be gained - merits needed to justify yourself before God. So giving alms to the beggars in the street wasn't really done out of love for the poor, but out of love for self. The beggar was merely a means to an end. The neighbor was instrumentalized, not loved.

Luther called them out, saying, "that's not love." Love demands that you give to your neighbor *because your neighbor needs something* not because you are trying to rack up points or make a name for yourself in some way. Our neighbor can so easily become a means to our ends as we seek our own self-justification.

So why love my neighbor? Because my neighbor needs love just as I do and because I have been made free to do so – free because Christ and Christ alone justifies my existence before God and before all people. We simply don't have to worry about that stuff. Just trust in God's grace, be grateful, and do what God made you to do: love your neighbor. It's in our DNA. Now that God's taken yourself off your hands and all your games of self-justification, go and love your neighbor. Jesus already showed you how.

Jesus reminded us that the Ten Commandments can be summarized thusly: love God and love your neighbor. And as Luther reminded us, loving our neighbor means more than prohibition – don't kill your neighbor, and the like. It also means, conversely, *help your neighbor* in every way you can to have a good life. And this is 24/7 kind of stuff. The question is: when we face our neighbor, whoever they may be, how can they know that we are *free. for. them.* Amen.