

## “Getting Free”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens  
based on the theme, “FAITH AND FREEDOM”  
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.  
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### John 8:31-36 [ NRSV ]

<sup>31</sup>To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup>Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

<sup>33</sup>They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

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**F**reedom and truth – that’s the American way isn’t it? But when we move beyond a surface understanding of either one they are not as simple as they sound. We’ve already talked about the fact that there is more to freedom than freedom “from.” The debate about whether truth is absolute or relative is as alive today as it was when Pontius Pilate asked, “what is truth, is mine the same as yours?”

Jesus says, “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Let’s take a deeper look at this simple statement and see if we can find out what it means at a deeper level and maybe in the process discover how we can live it more fully.

It seems to me that we all want to find the key to getting free. It is as if we are locked up in some way. Maybe we are not physically locked up in a prison. We may be free politically. We may be free in many ways, but every one of us

knows there are ways in which we are not free and we want to find the key to getting free.

Jesus not only says, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free, he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” But we seem more interested in debating what that truth is than how it sets us free. It seems to me that a lot of Christians want to use some absolute theological proposition to lock the gate and keep as many out as they can.

Rather than debate truth, I have been trying to reflect on the ways Jesus Christ has shown me the truth. I have to confess it isn’t always easy to accept. He has shown me the truth of how I have been unfaithful to him. He has shown me the truth about my failure to be loving to others. But thankfully he has also shown me the truth of God’s forgiving love. He has spoken in Scripture and in prayers and in times of

reflection that he knows the truth about me and still loves me. That truth alone should make me freer to live faithfully. Because that is what I truly want to be free to do. I want to be free enough to live more faithfully.

I know it is true that sin enslaves me, enslaves us all. I know that real freedom comes from God who sent Jesus Christ to reveal this truth and set us free. Theology aside, I believe that sin lies all the time. Sin tells me it can set me free from all of God's rules and laws. Sin tells me I can be selfish and it won't really hurt anyone or damage me. It lies and I know it and yet I still let it lead me away from freedom and truth.

Have you experienced that kind of truth? Sin is kind of like a tar baby. It keeps tempting you to grab more and more of it until you are stuck. Edward Markquart tells a true story of his own experience of how complicated sin can become. It happened because of a crush he had as a fifteen-year-old boy.

"Fifteen years old. I remember falling in love, so passionately in love, with Adelma. I remember that one night as vividly as one can remember. Adelma was having a slumber party out on her family's farm that night, and her mom and dad were gone. I knew that her parents were gone. I was in charge of our gas station; we sold cars and had a showroom as part of that gas station. There was a brand new 1954 Oldsmobile Star Fire convertible on the showroom floor. It was the coolest machine that I had ever seen. My folks were also gone. I was in charge of the gas station. I

wasn't supposed to; I was a bit too rebellious in those days and I disconnected the speedometer, had no driver's license, snuck the convertible off the showroom floor, and drove out to see Adelma. That was the shape of love in those days; show off the car.

"I dared to stay only for fifteen minutes, so as not to get caught. I hit the ignition, and the car's engine wouldn't turn over. The battery was dead. Nervous and panicking, I borrowed her father's pick-up without his permission and drove to town and got the tow-truck, drove back to her farm, and towed the brand new, automatic transmission car back to town. I got the car into the showroom. I put the tow truck back. I drove out to the farm, and the car that I was borrowing then ran out of gas. It was two o'clock in the morning and the worst night of my young life. I wanted to run away, but Nielsey Nielsen wouldn't let me. We had to wake up another farmer and borrow gas. We finally got all the vehicles back to their proper places before we got caught. That was the shape of love in those days, trying to impress a young girl with a fancy car. For Adelma, I would do almost anything."<sup>1</sup>

Now as sin goes that's not so extravagant, but it makes the point – sin tells me love means doing this thing, when in reality it has nothing to do with love at all. It is a lie and so much more could have gone wrong than just a dead battery, running out of gas, and the

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<sup>1</sup> "It's About Love, Love, Love," sermonsfromseattle.com.

dread of being caught. The lie binds us to itself. The truth sets us free, says Jesus.

The second part of that equation is freedom. But it too is complicated to calculate at times. Sometimes it is as hard to discern between freedom and selfishness as it is truth and lie. We have covered this before, but part of the truth that sets us free is the truth that one way we can measure whether something is the truth is to check whatever we do for its “Selfishness Quotient.” What I mean is if we want to know the truth about whether we are acting freely or not is to ask ourselves, “what am I getting out of this?”

Now in our culture that is pretty much the measure of everything’s worth. In other words, it isn’t worth doing if there isn’t anything in it for me. I want to suggest to you that this is not the pathway to freedom. It is the pathway to a prison of isolation and death. It is a pathway away from all that God gave us life to live. If we ask ourselves whenever we do something, even if it is for someone we profess to love, “what am I getting out of this,” it will help keep us honest. Because then we must evaluate whether what we are about to do is truly loving or truly selfish. I think in most instances God would hope for at least a 51-49% split in favor of truly loving over truly selfish.

But the truth shall set us free, says Jesus. I think that this is going to take a lot more than my own efforts, or your own efforts. And thank God it isn’t dependent upon those efforts, because

otherwise we will never be truly free. It will take transformation and that is God’s work. Guy Sayles says, “Genuine transformation is not a self-help exercise or a do-it-yourself project. It is God’s work. Transformation happens as God convinces us we that we are loved-that, like Jesus, we are God’s beloved children. ... [ God invites us ] to experience a relationship with God that embraces and transcends our fondest experiences of both father and mother. God’s love for us is tender and strong, reassuring and challenging, nurturing and empowering. God’s arms of welcome and affirmation are always open to us. We are God’s children. We are loved.”<sup>2</sup>

This is why faith in Jesus Christ is important. Faith in love is fine, but faith in Jesus Christ reminds me that I cannot love enough on my own. I have found it is only when I let the love of God flow through me that I am able to love unselfishly, or even know what it means to love unselfishly. We do not love others as Christians because we love love. We love others because God’s love is in us. We love because God first loved us, John says in his Epistle. Jesus Christ embodied that love. He revealed it in his person and no one else has done that in the same way. So I have faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Lord of my life, and the Savior of the world. My love cannot save me, let alone the world, and neither can yours and neither could all of ours together on

<sup>2</sup> Guy Sayles, “We Will Be Like Jesus,” day1.org, April 30, 2006.

our own. It is the love of God that came to us in Jesus Christ that is the truth about salvation. And it is salvation that truly sets us free.

So as I wrestled with this text it finally came to me in a sacred moment that it is really very simple. The truest of all truths that have ever been true is right there before us. Even though this passage never uses the word, the truest of all truths, the one that will set us free is this: God is love, and God loves us more completely than we can ever imagine or believe, yet the more we know that truth the freer we will be. God's love is true and it will set us free.

John testifies to it over and over. The word occurs more than forty times in John's gospel alone, let alone the epistles:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son...”

“Love one another as I have loved you...”

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you...”

“I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them...”

The problem is that we are afraid of this love in many ways. We are afraid because most of the time love has come with strings attached. Others have loved us, and we have loved others but the subtle message we send and receive is conditional. “I love you if...” I love you, but...” “I love you as long as...”

This is that “selfish” love that I spoke about before. It is not the love God has for us, but we have to come to know God better to understand that God's love is qualitatively different from the kind of love we normally practice.

God never attaches conditions but we have a hard time being free enough to accept this love and live it as freely as God wants us to. The more I am able to believe in and accept the love that God has for me the more free I will be – free to love others the same way. I will confess to you that this is not easy. Loving this way is hard to learn. When we know the truth of God's love it will set us free to love others the same way. When we love as God loves we will have found the key to getting free. AMEN.