

REFORMATION SUNDAY

JOHN 8:31-36

OCTOBER 27, 2019

"IF THAT'S WHAT FREEDOM MEANS"

Abraham Lincoln employed his legal and political skills and Christian beliefs to bring the evil of slavery to an end. But he was not apparently averse to other methods. On at least two attested occasions as President, Lincoln offered to buy slaves - once through congressional appropriation and once with personal funds, so as to gain them their freedom. A story, apocryphal but illustrative, describes how while a lawyer Lincoln traveled back to his native Kentucky and came upon a slave auction. He'd never seen one - most of his life was spent in the free state of Illinois. The spectacle of humans being bought and sold horrified him. After watching a while, Lincoln was set to leave when a young girl was put on the platform and the bidding started. She was evidently not a good specimen - there weren't many bids. About the time the auctioneer was going to close the bidding Lincoln threw up his hand and offered a bit more.

The gavel came down and Lincoln owned a slave. She was walked over to him. After a few awkward moments of staring at one another, Lincoln said to her *'you're free'*, and started to walk away. She didn't understand. *'What do you mean free? You mean I can do whatever I want?'* 'Yes', Lincoln said. *Free means I can talk when ever I want?'* 'Yes' he replied. *Free means I can go where ever I want?'* Lincoln said *"Yes...you're free, you can go where ever you want. "Master"*, she said, *"if free means I can do whatever I want and go where ever I want....I want to go with you'.*

Jesus says *'If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!'* Saying such a thing elicited the same curious looks from his listeners as a slave girl shot Lincoln. But they were more looks of bemusement - his listeners didn't think they were slaves to anything. Such is the nature of our souls - they can convince us of things that just plain ain't so. They can tell us we're alright just as we are. In the Jews case they were planting a flag in the historical as well as contemporary fallacy of being a free nation. But that's the trouble with telling someone they're free - if they're used to slavery, or sin, the notion of freedom doesn't compute. Or it forces you to make a confession you don't want to make - it presupposes some sort of "un-freedom - bondage."

In our lesson from John, we souls might tempt us to think Jesus words about freedom mean *"release from old ways of interpreting Scripture"* or *"put your mind at ease - peace I leave with you"* free. Paul in Romans begs to differ, or clarify. Being free means having been paid for - *"a sacrifice of atonement by his blood."* Atonement for the Jewish people was accomplished through burnt offering - their "atonement sacrifices" erased a debt of sin owed by giving something up with no hope of return - separating oneself from something of value to make satisfaction. The thing burned was erased by fire symbolizing the erasing of the debt (sin).

The aroma of smoke was thought to be pleasing to God, but God gained nothing from the sacrifice. Paul says however that through the atoning sacrifice of his blood, we gain something through Jesus – freedom. God is God – undiminished in glory always. In the sacrifice Paul describes, there is only gain. Which makes Lincoln’s story so attractive as an illustration.

God doesn’t “buy” us with Christ’s blood to control us - he sets us free with it. We can literally be freed from sin and despair and the influence of Satan; and walk right back into it if we want to. What does free mean? Does it mean we can do whatever we want? Say whatever we want? Go where ever we want? The grace of God is free – Jesus said it, Paul “fleshed” the meaning of those words out in Romans 3. The question is, what are you going to do with freedom? The slave girl in this story could have wandered right back toward her old “owners” and been captured again. In some sense that’s precisely what the Jews in John 6 were poised to do – better the slavery you know than the freedom you don’t to borrow an old adage.

In another sense, the story suggests the girl wanted to follow Lincoln for safety’s sake. That’s an attractive alternative – live under a canopy of grace – but what we end up wanting is a fortress of law that doesn’t let bad out. But I take from the story the slave girl wanted to know more about a man who would pay for her and expect nothing of her – except that she enjoy freedom.

I once preached on this text to a congregation I served while they were in the early days of conflict. On the occasion of the sudden, some said “overdue” others “forced” resignation of my colleague and our Senior Pastor. Sadness had given way to anger and resentment - folks drawing lines in the sand all over the place. If this happens, I’m leaving. If that doesn’t happen...I’m leaving. I tried to remind, them, to little success I’m afraid, that anger leaves with you.

New congregation or time off from church sounded appealing, but anger would remain, simmered down but not extinguished. Like a virus, it goes dormant until you see the one with whom you have disagreed....then you shoot a glance or turn from one, and it percolates again. You uncomfortably leave the room, or turn around and take another aisle in the store. You stop returning phone messages or you’re always busy when an invitation is extended.

And you’re stuck in it, you can’t move. Anger’s best work is to paralyze. In it, we are anything but free. Our hope, and frankly I don’t think we ever got there was to enter the land of the free by being a congregation of the brave, and enter a time of mutual confession and consolation. We did a lot of fixing of our constitution and brought about some alterations to our council, but as I look back, we mostly sought freedom in law, the safety and security of a new procedure or the illusion that “*we’ll know better next time*” – but not freedom in Christ. I’m as much to blame as anyone.

Luther wrote, in his treatise “*The Freedom of a Christian*” of 1520, “*the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own.*” This is the so called “*blessed exchange*” – Christ, full of grace, life and salvation, the soul full of sin and despair. But let faith come between them, Luther said, and the exchange happens. But you have to ask yourself - who would make a trade like? If that’s what faith gives, and faith makes you that free...wouldn’t you like to know...and wouldn’t you want to go with Him?

AMEN