

“Freedom’s Just Another Word”

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John 8:31-36 + “the truth will set you free”

“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

What can these words of Jesus possibly mean? Which truth of Jesus’ many truths is the one referred to? What is the truth which sets us free?

As in today’s text, it is sometimes a chore to wade through John’s involuted logic and poetical language to get to Jesus’ core meaning. John has a way of talking around and around an issue and then when we are reeling in confusion; he suddenly homes in with a real zinger. Naturally we all long to be free. Naturally we think we are free. Yet, the way from truth to freedom is not all that clear.



Talking about the path from truth to freedom, Cindy Rigby tells of



when she was a young girl of tender age she would occasionally do something wrong. Not often mind you, but often enough – no more often than any one of us. And like each of us she would think when she did bad behavior that she was acting out her own nature. Her mother’s answer was to look over her glasses and say with kind sternness “that’s not my Cindy!”

Cindy even so young got the point – and it’s a good one. Whatever the terrible behavior her mother would raise an eyebrow and say “that’s not my Cindy!” Mother knows. Cindy thought that in acting up she was

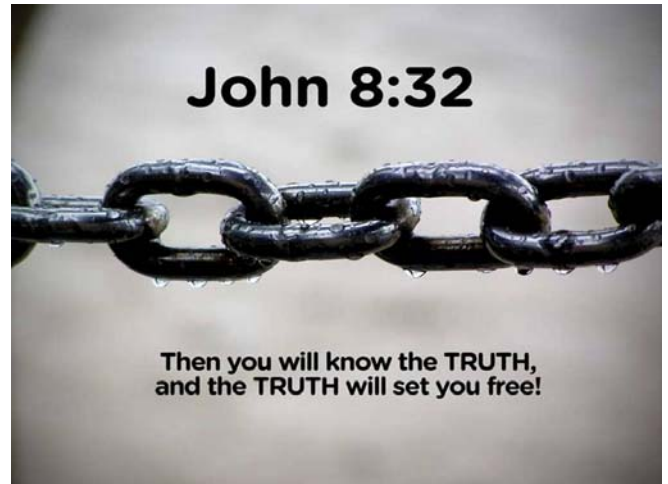
acting free. But Mother knows best – in actual fact Cindy was not acting on her God-given nature but against it. Cindy was not acting in freedom but under constraint to compulsion.

Aren't we that way too. We think mistakenly that we are most free when we acting up, acting against God – God gave us freedom and we wrongly assume that we only show it by doing bad. We revel in our freedom even though we know it to be wrong but that is a false consciousness. Like a child we think we are acting free when we follow our impulses and desires. Quite the contrary, the truth is that we are the most truly free when we choose to do the right which is consistent with our God-created natures, and we are the most bound when we choose to give in to our impulsive compulsion to do wrong.

That was what Jesus is getting at when he says

“everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

“Everyone who commits a sin” – well that's everyone – **“is a slave to sin”** – that's every human ever. We think we are acting out our freedom when we sin, but Jesus says that is actually enslavement. Jesus is saying as plainly as John's style will allow that we are most truly free when we choose to follow our God given nature and that we are the most enslaved when we give in to the compulsion to follow our courser selves.



“That's not my Cindy!” “That's not my child!” God is raising an eyebrow, looking over glasses, saying with kind sternness to each of us: “Child of God, that's not my child!”

This is part of the truth of which Jesus speaks when he says

“you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Cindy is a mother now herself. So she knows this truth now even more poignantly as she passes it on to another generation. She teaches at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and following

Jesus' logic today, she defines freedom as "continuity between acts and nature." To choose otherwise than our God given nature is to choose not freedom but bondage.

This is definitely counter-intuitive. This is not logical by human standards but definitely represents God's logic. Think: God always acts consistent with God's character and being – and indeed God represents the perfection of freedom itself – the only truly free actor in the universe. Freedom is indeed the "continuity between our actions and our God-given nature." Further:

"If we follow Luther and understand "sin" as self-centeredness, then those who are doing self-centered things become slaves to themselves—their own wants and desires. Often this is how people may understand freedom—doing whatever I want to do. But that definition of freedom is actually slavery to one's self. Being set free means having our desires and centeredness turned away from ourselves. Giving is more important than getting; and at the extreme, dying for others is more important than preserving one's own life."¹

Let's explore more deeply this idea of freedom as living consistent with our God-inspired core nature. Great example:



Kris Kristofferson's most popular and most widely covered song: "*Me and Bobby McGee*." It has been recorded by more than fifty artists from Roger Miller to Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley and the Comets, Loretta Lynn and Johnny Cash, from Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs to

Pink, from Dottie West to Jennifer Love Hewitt. Janis Joplin's version went to number one almost immediately after her death in 1970. Kristofferson wrote a great line in "*Bobby McGee*" which gets exactly at Jesus' logic:

“freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”

Hard to do, but put yourself in the place of the narrator of *“Bobby McGee.”* The character in the song has made many, many poor choices. The gender of the protagonist is ambiguous – sometimes female, sometimes male but the singer now recognizes just how many terrible consequences there are from living self-centered, from living under bondage to one’s impulses, from living for self.

He/she regrets more than any other letting one lover in particular *“slip away.”* He/she has lost everything, has lost love, the most precious thing in life, and now has nothing else left to lose.

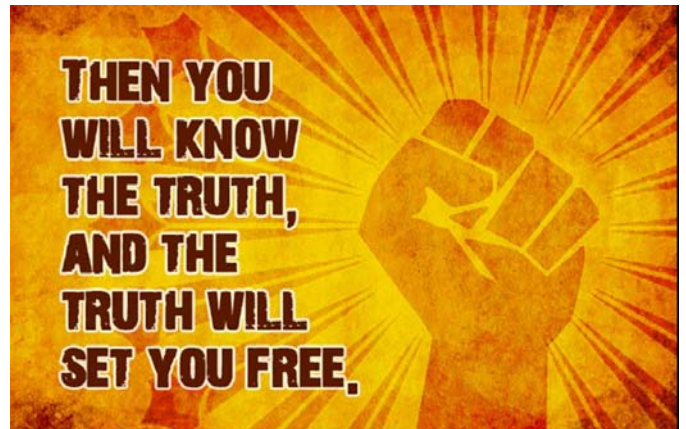
The narrator of the song now knows that true freedom comes from “nothing left to lose.” There are no choices left but the right choices. All the other doors have been closed by the necessary consequences. All has been lost. All the bad choices have been made, the painful consequences experienced, the dross burned away and all that is left is what’s right and good and beautiful.

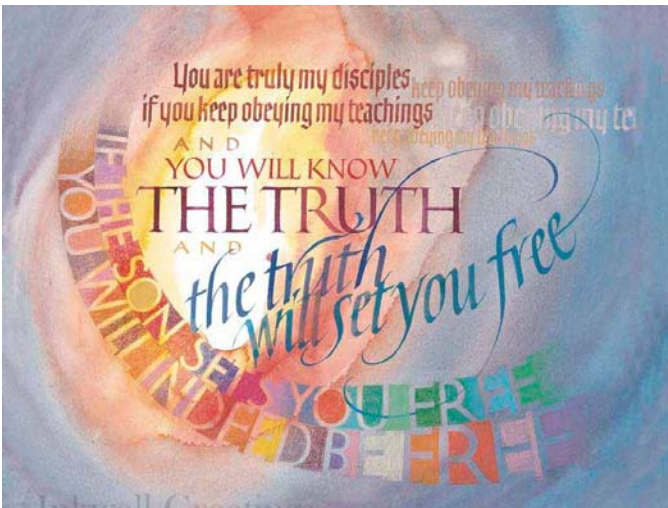
Freedom’s just another word for allowing what we do to emerge from what we truly are – for our actions to emerge from what God intends us to be. And what we are is children of God.

As Jesus points out being a child of God is different from being a child of Abraham although they certainly may overlap. The Jews in our text today countered Jesus’ statement about **“knowing the truth and being set free”** with a claim of being entitled to a special relationship with God’s truth because they are “descendant of Abraham.” Jesus responds with typical Johannine roundabout reasoning.

But the upshot to those Jews listening, who were already shown to be believers in Jesus, the upshot ultimately is as Jesus stated:

“if you would continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.”





Jesus invites all children of Abraham to become children of God by **“abiding in,” “continuing in”** Jesus’ word. God invited us as well as all children of all parents, whoever we descend from, to become children of God by “abiding in,” that is, “continuing in” God’s word.

And how do we do that? In John’s Gospel every answer begs another question. How do we do that? We continue in God’s word by allowing what we do to emerge from what God truly wants us to be.

Try this: along the lines of “What Would Jesus Do?” – at each decision point, each time we are called on to choose one action or another, one path or another, ask ourselves always:

“is this consistent with my God-created nature?”

Please don’t wait until there’s nothing left to lose.

Please don’t wait until all the other doors are closed and only God’s right choices remain.

Don’t wait until the pain, long-suffering and road-weariness of life imparts wisdom.

Ask first every time “What does God want me to do?” “What has God placed in my soul to tell me which path to take?”

In Christ you are free,

in Christ I am free,

in Christ we are all free – to do the right thing

“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

what do you plan to do about it?

¹ Brian Stoffregen, < <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/> > “REFORMATION DAY: John 8:31-36 Exegetical Notes” p.5