

**Sermon for October 25, 2014**  
**John 8:31-38**

“They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.’” I picture Jesus shaking his head in disbelief and thinking to himself, really. Every year at the Passover they are to recite and remember their flight from Egypt to remember that it was the Lord their God who delivered them from their bondage. They were captured and enslaved by the Babylonians and then the Assyrians. At this moment there are armed Roman soldiers roaming the streets of Jerusalem; they are paying a tax to support their oppressors and they can say with a straight face—we have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free”?

If these statements didn’t hit so close to home we could easily dismiss them, but aren’t we the land of the free and the home of the brave? We in the church know differently for we confess nearly every Sunday that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. Notice that the word used is sin—singular, not sins—plural. Most of the time we talk about sins—the bad things that we do; but sin described in the Bible and especially by Paul isn’t as much of a thing as it is a force—a power that seeks to rob God’s children of an abundant life—and a condition in which we are trapped. A condition where we live in a continually insecure and fearful state; a state where we believe that we are not safe, we are not enough, we are not worthy of love.

The questions asked of parents and sponsors of children being baptized capture this idea of sin as an entity. Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against

God? Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God? This force of sin, this insecurity usually precedes most if not all of our sins. Or to put it in another way; we do bad things because we feel bad about ourselves.

Let's look at Adam and Eve the place where sin began. Most of us recall their wrong doing as one of disobedience, but before they disobeyed they doubted. They were insecure about God's love for them and that God hadn't shared everything they needed to know with them. So they were able to be tricked into eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge so that they could establish their worth and place in God's kingdom by their own knowledge and power and not by their relationship with God as a child of God. They were so afraid and insecure that they disobeyed God and sinned.

Why is it important to distinguish between sins and sin? Because there are only two things that we can do when dealing with sins—our wrong actions—either punishment or forgiveness. But either of these two responses can leave the person unchanged and trapped in sin unless we deal with the insecurity. And there is only one way to deal with insecurity and that's with love. Love is the only response that will create a whole person without insecurities. Think of a time when you were completely loved and accepted, confident that you were enough as you are; did you feel tempted to sin?

Which brings us back to our Gospel reading for today. The Jewish people talking to Jesus feel so insecure about Jesus' offer of freedom that they needed to justify themselves and claim to have never been slaves to anyone! Human beings have this need to justify ourselves. Too often though we tend to think of

justification just in religious terms; as in earning our salvation, but it is much more than that. It's more like Adam and Eve trying to do it alone, on our own terms and by our own means—without God or neighbor.

In Jesus' time it looked like the Jewish people who observed the traditions so closely that they couldn't see God doing something new in Jesus. In Martin Luther's time it looked like those who went through the ceremonies and purchased indulgences to guarantee a place in heaven. Today it looks like the acquisition of wealth, status or prestige to create an illusion of a meaningful and purposeful life. The one thing these all have in common is that we are trying to create an identity that doesn't include a relationship with God.

No matter how hard we try these attempts fail. We can't buy love. I can tell you from personal experience that no matter how long or how hard you work it won't guarantee a sense of meaning and purpose in your life. No matter how much power we accumulate it doesn't guarantee that we will be accepted. And when these fail like they always do; we've bought into what the world has told us—that if we just work harder and longer and buy more things we'll achieve a fulfilling life.

Thanks be to God that we are accepted not because of what we've done or accomplished, but simply because God loves us. Our identity doesn't come from our hard work, but it is a gift of grace. Our destiny isn't secured by our own achievements, but is secured by the one who died on a cross and was raised from the dead; showing us once again that God's love is more powerful than even death.

Paul puts the truth this way in our reading from Romans today: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law.”

None of us can do this on our own and when we try we end up hurting ourselves and others resulting in condemnation. God loves us too much to leave it at that. But God’s ultimate response isn’t one of judgment but of grace. After demonstrating to us that our self justification won’t work; God justifies us by giving us that which we can’t attain ourselves and draws us into our identity as God’s beloved children.

God knows us—insecurities and all—better than we know ourselves. And even knowing all about us—God still loves us! And with that unconditional love we can end our attempts to justify ourselves and be raised to new life as beloved children of God; for Paul writes in another section of Romans this truth “God proves his love for us for while we were still sinners Jesus Christ died for us.” And when you know the truth it will set you free.