

Sermon – John 8:31-36
David R. Lyle
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“Always Being Set Free”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. My propensity for getting lost knows no bounds. It is for this reason that I often have my phone’s map function up and running even if all I’m doing is running errands around town. It is a propensity that journeys with me when I travel, one that unsurprisingly becomes more pronounced when I’m in a new place. Those of you who have travelled to Wittenberg, Germany have no doubt found your way around this lovely town quite easily. It is not a big place, but it’s big enough for me to get lost. Several years ago, I spent two weeks as the English-language pastor-in-residence in Wittenberg. I had a horrible time getting around at first; it was embarrassingly hard to find my way back to important places, like that restaurant where I had an amazing hamburger – which is, of course, at the aptly named WittenBurger. It dawned on me – perhaps not as quickly as it should have – that all I had to do was look up. The town’s skyline, such as it is, is dominated by spires: the single tower of All Saint’s, the Castle Church, and the dual towers of St. Mary’s, the Stadtkirche. Anywhere you go in Wittenberg, you can look up and see these two landmarks. Finding them, you can orient yourself and get wherever you’re going. This is a fitting lesson to learn in Wittenberg, for this was where Martin Luther and others helped the church look again in the right direction – not up at spires, but at Jesus Christ, the Word of God who had come down to them.

2. Today, 502 years after Luther posted his 95 Theses, we are still a people with a propensity for getting lost. And it is still Jesus Christ to whom we look, from whom we receive direction for our journey. We find ourselves in John's Gospel today, and Jesus is in Jerusalem. He is speaking to the people about where they're going; in which direction they should continue. One way leads to truth and freedom; all other roads do not. The people bristle at the notion that they aren't free, that they cannot make their own way in this world or to the next. "We are descendants of Abraham," they protest, "and have never been slaves to anyone." Well, let no one ever say that humans don't have a high capacity for self-deception. To be a descendant of Abraham is to be part of the people who were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years (never mind the Babylonian exile or the ongoing Roman occupation). Not only that, but this conversation takes place during the Festival of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, still celebrated by our Jewish neighbors. This festival commemorated the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, from slavery to freedom. It was a celebration of God's faithfulness, remembering that though they had tried to go their own way, God insisted on journeying with them, of tabernacling with them each day. Not only had the people been slaves, they also had a God who set them free, one step at a time over forty long years. From slavery to freedom, one step at a time.
3. Jesus reinterprets slavery, using old images of Egyptian chains to speak of the sin-sick curvatures of our souls, our lives. Yes, Jesus says, *you are a sinner*. Full stop. Your life is not what it was created to be. Given our high capacity for self-deception, we often pull off the great trick of ignoring this basic fact of our brokenness, but fact it remains. You are a sinner, shackled in sin's invisible but palpable grip, and so am I. But this is not where Jesus leaves us. For just as he reinterprets slavery as sin, so does he reinterpret the Promised Land as full freedom. And how does one get there? By continuing in Jesus' word, which is to say, by continuing in Christ himself. Jesus, God's enfleshed Word, now makes camp with us, tabernacles with us, is with us on the

journey, each step of the way. The poet Christian Wiman, who after years of insistent atheism awoke again to faith following a cancer diagnosis, writes: “If Christianity is going to mean anything at all for us now, then the humanity of God cannot be a half measure. He can’t float over the chaos of pain and particles in which we’re mired, and we can’t think of him gliding among our ancestors like some shiny, sinless superhero.” Wiman’s realization, like Luther’s, was simple. God does not demand that we get out of our own messes or clean up our own messed-up lives. We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So what does God do? Demand that we get back up? No. God falls down into the full depth of our sin and death. He is lifted up on the cross, lifted up from the tomb, lifts us up with him. Again, Wiman: “What a relief it can be to befriend contingency, to meet God right here in the havoc of chance, to feel enduring love like a stroke of pure luck.” Jesus joins us in our wanderings, meets us in our mess, and invites us to follow. From slavery to freedom, one step at a time.

4. To be a reforming church in our day is not to look back at where we came from. That is, not unless these backward glances remind us of the grace that has brought us so far and thus gives us courage to take one more step, slavery into freedom, death into resurrection, ever and again shedding the chains of sin, as Christ walks with us all the while. *The Lord of the Rings* has long been one of my favorite fictional travelogues. It is a story of having hope when there is every reason for despair. As the hobbit Samwise Gamgee tells his friend, Frodo, “Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. . . . Folk in those [old] stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.” So it is for the church, we who hold on to the promise of God that dwells with us, splashed across our foreheads and placed into our hands in the blessed sacraments. We hold on to the promise of God, the very Christ who has grabbed hold of our lives.

5. Freed and forgiven to walk toward freedom, we become open to the Spirit's stirrings in our church, our lives. We look to Christ and, reoriented, re-found, we journey together in God's light, letting that light burn more brightly through us. If the first sign given to help us reorient is the cross of Christ, the second is our neighbor. And seeing our neighbor, what do we do? In Christ's name, whatever our neighbor needs, given freely as a sign of our faithfulness. What does this look like? Today Jesus speaks about children finding a place in the Father's household forever, so perhaps we start with the children. Reformed, we pour ourselves into the lives our young people, ensuring that the more than 200 students who enter Grace school each day receive an education centered in faith, academics, and character; we do this because each of these 200-plus children is a disciple of Christ who will be sent out to change the world, often in ways that we will never hear about. Reformed, we journey with the people of Harmony Community Church in North Lawndale, especially the children, that they would be safe, healthy, and educated. Reformed, we pray for people, especially children, seeking better lives or fleeing violence, from Syria to our own southern border. And praying for them, we seek ways to be part of a solution. And when life ends we, reformed, walk alongside those who grieve and mourn, proclaiming the promise of Jesus, the crucified God who was raised so that we would never be lost again. Not even in death.
6. As it turns out, our propensity for getting lost is nothing compared to God's capacity to find. You, friends, have been found. Forgiven Set free. *Are being* set free anew in this moment. You have been justified, like words along the page's margin, lined up and made right in spite of yourselves. So what now, you justified sinners? The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, simply, "the just man justifies." Yes, you are just people, but you are *just* people, so do justice, sharing the freedom that has been gifted unto you. And keep walking. Look up to Christ who has come down to you. Stepping into the future, we hear Luther's voice from the past: "We do not depend on our own strength . . .

but on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.” You’ll know where you’re going because you’ll already be where you need to be. With Jesus, in whom there is truth, freedom, forgiveness, and life. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.