

## Freedom

*John 8:31-36 ~ October 30, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

***(The Jews) answered (Jesus), “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”***

It amazes me to realize that the popular cyberpunk science fiction classic, *The Matrix*, is now over 17 years old. Anyone here under 30 years of age is not likely to have actually seen this film when it was released in 1999 due to its PG-13 rating. So what does this movie have to do with the Jews and Jesus disagreeing about the nature of enslavement? It's a bit of a stretch, but I think the plot of “*The Matrix*” is a kind of paradigm for what had happened to the Jews and is still happening in the world today.

For those of you who find yourselves annoyed or impatient with science fiction, I ask your indulgence for the sake of the point I'm trying to make. In the plot of “*The Matrix*” opens on an utopian world. Everything was perfect. There were no wars or famines or sickness. People went about their lives in the simple joy of living well from day to day.

However, as the story unfolds, the viewer becomes aware that not everyone in this beautiful world is satisfied with its perfection. There is a group of dissidents who were actively working to undermine reality itself; claiming that it was an artificial construct. In the end, they are proved to be right. The utopian world that seemed to be the truth was only a virtual reality created by intelligent machines. This artificial world was used to trap and pacify all of humanity so that world-dominating-computers could harvest bioelectricity to power their own existence. When the protagonist, Thomas Anderson also known as Neo, is awakened from the matrix, he finds himself in a horrible world dominated by these intelligent machines. It is a world of darkness, where the sun never shines. It is a world of incredible ugliness where all humans are enslaved to the machinery of “*The Matrix*.”

I am quite sure that the creators of the movie, “*The Matrix*,” had no intention of furnishing a paradigmatic illustration of how the Jews could be so utterly confused about the new freedom Jesus was preaching. But the image of a world dominated by a malevolent force that intentionally deceives all humanity with its lies, while it holds them in utter bondage, is an image that is too accurate to pass up even if it is science fiction. This is because as the Bible reveals, this image is the truth about the Jews' situation and ours. According to the Bible, the force at the center of our world is called

Satan. He is also known as the father of lies. He seeks to deceive all of humanity about the true nature of life. He wants us to believe that everything is basically okay. If you work hard then the world will reward you. His doctrine teaches that your free will enables you to make choices that give you full access to everything in this life and the next. So if you work hard you will earn great rewards. But, if you do badly you will be punished. Because of Satan's dominance, that was how the Jews saw reality. So when Jesus told them that he had come to set them free, their natural response was to say, "Free from what? We are already as free as we can be. What more is there for you to offer?"

And of course they would have been right if the world really was the way it seems. But it isn't. The Bible reveals a view of the world that is incredibly sinister. God created the world to be good. Much of that goodness still exists in the world as God still continues to sustain it. As the Jesus says, ***"For God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."*** God continues to give good things through creation. But our perception of our world is twisted. That is Satan's work. That is how we have become confused about the nature and meaning of the lives we live.

Satan has convinced us that we can become like God. He has told us that the only worthwhile enterprise is to strive for righteousness. The Jews in today's text were all about striving for righteousness. Their perspective on reality was that they could choose to be completely righteous before God by their own free will.

Jesus challenged this in today's gospel text. He said,

***"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."***

The truth will set you free. Jesus means that the truth is different from the distortion of the common worldview. The desire to achieve righteousness by our own effort is a misrepresentation of the truth. The truth is that we are really in a pickle. Our faith in our own free will is the way we are held in bondage. The moment we realize that we are all sinners; we are all hopelessly lost in our own sin; so hopelessly lost in our own sin that we cannot by our own effort or understanding even come to God at all; only then do we even begin to approach the truth about our situation. Until we hear and believe the truth we are like blind people that insist we can see perfectly well. We run around bumping and stumbling because we pretend we can see. We argue that our will is free

and that it works perfectly fine. And in so doing we affirm our enslavement to sin and echo those Jews that spoke to Jesus so long ago.

***“We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”***

But Jesus says to them in return

***Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.***

And that is the truth! We are all slaves to sin. Every time we try to choose; every time we exercise our free will; every time we try to gain righteousness through good works; it is sin that actually calls the shots. That is what it means to be a slave. The slave does what the master wants. We are slaves to sin. Whatever we try to do will be an expression of our master. Whenever we try to gain righteousness on our own power, we will only gain another expression of sin. This is why we need a savior, my friends. The truth sets us free by showing us the terrible state of our situation. It is not pleasant, but it is where true hope resides. Paul puts it this way

***So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.***

So the truth that sets us free is the news about the terrible nature of our situation. Why does that set us free? It sets us free because it changes our understanding reality! We learn about the game that Satan is playing. We know that we need a Savior. We come to understand that more “will power” is not going to help. That is the lie. Any attempt to depend on the power of our wills puts us more firmly in bondage to sin. When we hear the truth that Christ brings, then we realize that we depend completely and only on the grace of God expressed by faith in Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate the Lutheran Reformation. Contrary to popular opinion Martin Luther did not invent salvation by grace through faith. Jesus did that. Luther did coin the phrases, Faith Alone, Grace Alone, and Word Alone. And those phrases have become watchwords for the truth that Jesus gives us in today’s Gospel. Freedom comes only through realization of our bondage to sin. Everything good comes to us as a free

gift of God. Luther actually wrote a book called, "The Bondage of the Will," as a stinging response to a fellow named Erasmus, who was a great scholar of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Erasmus had written a book entitled the "Freedom of the Will." His great work touted the lie that it is individual freedom which gains righteousness. This same thought had become the teaching of the Church in Luther's day. It enabled legal codes to burden and enslave the minds of people by regulations and superstitions. But the Lutheran Reformation was one of the times in history when the Spirit broke through with God's truth. A truth that revealed our great need for a savior that would save us lock, stock, and barrel from the fires of hell, which is the destination the lord of this world has in mind for us. But it is a truth that shows an ugly reality. The reality of our complete and total bondage to sin; the bondage of the very wills we want to be free. Only one option remains; we must put our faith completely in Jesus. The Law will not benefit us. Either Satan will control us or we will be lead through life by God's Holy Spirit. Only the power of Jesus Christ, revealing the truth and setting us free can change our situation from sin's slaves into beloved children of God; lead through life by Christ's Holy Spirit. As Jesus promises in today's text:

***The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.***

Yes, God's truth opens our eyes to the ugliness of our predicament. We have all been taken in by Satan's lies. Not one of us has escaped his incredible power to enslave the hearts and minds of all people. But in that flash of realization which comes from God's word, we suddenly see the truth. The truth is not about what you have done. The truth is about who you know. The truth is about who knows you. Jesus is God's son. Jesus remains in God's house forever. Jesus is part of eternity with God. It is this Jesus coming to you as truly human and truly God who saves you. He wrestles you free of Satan's control. He enters your life to end Satan's enslavement fully and finally in your death. He guides you each day with a living spirit that works inside your thoughts and feelings, your encounters and experiences, throughout your entire life. He tolerates every kick and scream you give back as he rescues you from your addiction to this world. And then by his power, as the true son of God, he makes you a child of the Heavenly Father. You are not a slave in the house of God. You are a son. You are a daughter. You are a true child of God. You belong in the kingdom through Jesus salvation. You belong there forever. You are free. You are free indeed.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.