

THE TRUTH THAT SETS US FREE

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. KEN SHIGEMATSU. 2013 SEPTEMBER 29.



JOHN 8:31-34

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When our son, Joey, was two years old, we were hanging out at Douglas Park here in Vancouver. We walked over to this wooden structure in the park, and he ended up climbing onto it. Again, he was two years old. I was standing right around here when he begins to walk across this suspension bridge on the wooden structure. As he gets about a third of the way down, he breaks out into a sprint (in so far as a two-year-old can sprint) and then does a 45-degree cut this way. I see that he's about to run right off the bridge, so I start sprinting under it. I remember his head falling first; he's falling straight down, as in a dive. I dive under the bridge and do kind of a sliding catch, and I catch him – I'm not exaggerating! – in a sliding catch. His head is about two inches off the ground.

I slowly raise my head: There's a woman staring at us, wide-eyed, and she says, "Nice catch!"

Some people think freedom is being able to do whatever you want to do. Apparently, when Joey was two years old, he thought freedom was being able to jump over the edge of the bridge and fly through the air. And maybe for a few moments he was feeling the exhilaration of being airborne, but had he hit the ground head first, he would not have been experiencing freedom.

Real freedom is not being able to do whatever we want to do. Real freedom is having the power to do what God designed us to do. Because when we honour our God-given design, we flourish and we are free.

In John 8, Jesus is in a conversation with some of his fellow Jews who at one point had believed in him, and this is what Jesus said: "To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (John 8:31-32[†]).

Let's pray.

Living God,

Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, we pray that you would draw us so close to Jesus that we not only know his truth in our head but that it seeps down into our hearts and into our lives so that we might live the truth and be set free.

We pray these things in Christ's name.

Amen.

In this message tonight, I want us to explore the paradox of how being bound to Jesus and particularly his wisdom sets us free.

We are in a series on what it looks like to experience God in every part of our lives, and we've been discussing how a rhythm of life – or, as the monks described it, a "rule of life," which means a trellis – that supports our friendship with Jesus Christ can make us truly free people.

Two weeks ago, as we were introducing the trellis, we looked at the gift of Sabbath: If we honour the 24-hour

[†] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®.

period of rest, taking time to pray and to play, we'll find it to be a life-giving gift.

Last Sunday, some of you were on the Walk for Reconciliation, and we talked about how a rhythm of prayer makes us more conscious of God. We discussed the three spontaneous prayers: Wow, Help, Thank You. *[A siren blares in the background.]* Even when we're hearing a siren, in the midst of a crisis, we can say, "Thank you."

Tonight, we're going to look at how the Word, the Word of Jesus, sets us free.

As we were considering a title for the book that eventually was named *God in My Everything*, one of the possible titles that was put on the table was "A Rule That Sets You Free." Some folks from California objected to that title because of the word "rule," and I thought, "Oh, well, you need to define that because that's a little too intense." I believe that while in the end we picked the right title, it is also true that the rule of Jesus – as paradoxical as it sounds – does set us free; that the reign of Jesus in our life really liberates us. We are going to explore that tonight.

Here, in John 8, Jesus defines freedom in a way that is different from the way most people define freedom in our society. Many people in our world define freedom as the capacity to do what they want to do – to follow their impulses. But we know from experience and from observation that sometimes when we follow our impulses, it leads not to freedom but to bondage. Jesus, in verse 34, says, **"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin"** (John 8:34 NLT).

In some cases, it is really obvious, as in drug use or pornography use. If we turn to these things, we may experience a dopamine hit to our brain with the drugs, with the porn. We may feel temporarily lifted, but we're going to come down and experience withdrawal, and in order to achieve the same high, we'll need a little bit more of the drug than we used before, a little bit more of the porn than we used before. We'll find ourselves craving more and more of what satisfies less and less. We'll be walking this pathway to prison.

With other sins, it may be less obvious. When we choose to lie or harbour resentment or act on our greed, we create a little neural pathway that makes it just a little bit easier the next time around to do these things – to lie, to harbour resentment, to act on our greed. You see, according to the Scriptures, according to Jesus, the penalty for sin is usually not zap judgment, as in a lightning bolt from heaven. The penalty for sin is more organic; it's built in. The penalty for sin is more sin, more of what we chose: a greater desire and tendency to sin. And then we become trapped.

The philosopher William James explains that a habit, good or bad, is like water that begins to create a groove in the ground – a channel that grows broader and deeper. The water stops, and when it resumes, it flows again and follows its original path. James is saying that when we commit to an action and it becomes a habit, it is like water in the ground creating this little groove. As we continue in that habit, that groove becomes a deeper, broader channel; it takes a certain route. Even if we stop doing what we're doing, when we take up that action again, it follows that same pathway.

The paradox is that sometimes a path that we think will lead to freedom makes us a slave. Conversely, sometimes when we pursue a path that seems to others binding in some way, that path leads to freedom. The writer Elton Trueblood said that the "paradox of freedom" is "that we are most free when we are bound."

Jesus says, **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** These words can sound presumptuous to us, even arrogant, but let me set up the context where Jesus says this.

Earlier in our passage, in John 8, Jesus is in conversation with some of the Jewish people who once believed in him, and they're saying, "Jesus, we know where we came from: We are the descendants of Abraham," who had

lived 2,000 years before. They're saying to Jesus, "We are the biological and spiritual descendants of Abraham. But we don't know where *you* came from; we don't know who your father is." They were insinuating that Jesus had an illegitimate birth.

Even secular historians can see that Jesus had these mysterious circumstances surrounding his birth. The Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit supernaturally enabled a virgin named Mary to conceive. I know that many people find that very hard to accept, but a miracle, by definition, is when God intervenes and causes something that was otherwise impossible to become possible. So if you believe in God or that there might be a God, it shouldn't be that difficult to believe that Mary could have supernaturally conceived, with God's help, a human being who would become God in human flesh, Jesus Christ.

Jesus' Jewish detractors say, "Hey, we're the children of Abraham, but we don't know where you've come from. Who is your father? Who's your daddy?" A little paraphrase, but it gets the point across! Jesus responds by saying, "**Before Abraham was**" – and Abraham lived 2,000 years ago – "**I am**" (John 8:58 KJV).

In a Jewish context, for Jesus to say, "**Before Abraham was, I am,**" would have been the clearest way he could have stated, "I am God." Why? Because 1,500 years before this conversation took place, Moses is in the desert; he sees a vision of God manifest in a burning bush, so he takes off his sandals because he recognizes that he's on holy ground, and he says, "God, tell me your name." God simply says, "**I AM WHO I AM**" (Exodus 3:14). When Jesus says to his fellow Jews, "**Before Abraham was**" – before Moses was – "**I am,**" he is saying, categorically and without any contradiction, "I am God." That's why his fellow Jews wanted to stone him: That was blasphemy.

C. S. Lewis points out that if Jesus actually claimed to be God, which he did, then he was either a liar, a lunatic – or he was Lord and God. And if Jesus Christ is in fact Lord and God in human form, then it's not an overstatement for Jesus to say, "**If you hold to my teaching ... you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**"

You see, because Jesus' truth reflects reality. It reflects the way things really are.

There is a difference between the law of the stop sign and the law of gravity. The law of the stop sign says that if you don't stop at the corner of 10th and Manitoba, you're getting a fine of \$100 or whatever the penalty is – if, I guess, a police officer is around. But the law of gravity says that if you jump over your balcony from the 13th floor of your apartment building, you're going to get hurt. It's the law of gravity. The law of fire says that if you put your hand in fire, you're going to be burned. You may break the law of the stop sign, but you and I never really break the law of gravity or the law of fire; we just break our self over it. But when we honour those laws and the laws of Jesus Christ and his wisdom, which reflects reality, we honour ourselves, our design; we flourish; and we are free.

When you're at an airport and you see a 747 jumbo jet, if you're like me, you wonder, "How can this thing lift off the ground?" But when a 747, despite its massive weight, combines its engine power and the law of aerodynamics, it can rise to 35,000 feet and fly at 600 miles an hour. Now, I don't know anything about engineering an airplane, but I'm imagining the folks who designed these things have some understanding of the laws of aerodynamics. But even if they don't fully understand it, even if they receive those mathematical equations from others, they trust those laws and they design airplanes in a way that honour those laws – and those airplanes fly. And even if you're like me and you don't understand much about the laws of aerodynamics, you can still trust those laws, get in the plane and go places you couldn't otherwise go.

So it is with the law and the wisdom of Jesus Christ. Even if we don't fully understand the law of God or the wisdom of Jesus Christ, if we accept it and honour it, we can benefit from it, we can flourish, and we can find ourselves free.

A few mornings a week, I'll go for a swim at the Hillcrest Pool not far from here; it's between here and Queen Elizabeth Park. On some mornings I'll swim 10 laps, which is a thousand metres. If I've got a little more time, I might swim 15 laps, which is 1,500 metres. Occasionally, I've swam 20 laps or 2,000 metres, and when I do 2,000, I'm feeling tired, I'm feeling spent, but I'm also thinking that for Michael Phelps, this is just a warm-up. Just a warm-up!

Someone asked me this week: "Does Michael Phelps inspire you?" I said, "No. Michael Phelps depresses me!" I was watching him on TV during the Olympics, and I'm kind of timing in my head, looking at my watch, and I'm noticing that when he gets to the wall— If I were swimming in the pool, I might be halfway there. He's just... just depressing, as far as I'm concerned!

Michael Phelps has a size-14 foot, which acts as a virtual flipper in the water. He's also 6 feet 3 inches, so he's ideally built as a swimmer. But he has also trained really hard. He understands how his body moves through the water; he understands the principles of hydrodynamics. (It's an actual word, "hydrodynamics." I said "aquadynamics" in the first service, and someone said, "The word is 'hydrodynamics.'" I'm always needing to learn!) Because he honours the laws of hydrodynamics, he's free in the water.

To shift the metaphor just a little bit: If you're a sailor at sea and you understand the laws of the wind and the wave, you will be free as a sailor. But if you say, "Well, I'm not really a rule-keeper. I'm kind of a maverick; I'm kind of a rebel. I'm going to disregard the law of the wind and the wave." What's going to happen to you? You're not going to be so cool. Well, you'll be cool, but cool in a different way: You're going to be cold because you're going to be man overboard or woman overboard; you're going to be capsized, so you'd better wear a wetsuit! But if you honour the law of the wind and the wave as you sail, you will be free.

I want to shift the analogy a little bit for you musicians. If you're a pianist or a guitarist— (Is that a word, "guitarist"? "Guitar player"? See, now I'm getting into areas I don't know much about, so I better move quickly!) If you understand the laws of vibration, the laws of notes, the laws of scales, and you honour them and you practice, you will be free.

So it is with the way of Jesus Christ. If we understand his wisdom and his laws, which reflect reality, and we practice them, we will flourish and we will be free because Jesus is a rule that sets us free; it's a reign that liberates us.

Here in the text, in John 8, Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." The words "hold to" come from the Greek word *ménō* (μένω), which is the same word that Jesus uses in John 15:5 when he says, "If you remain [abide] in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." The word *ménō* can be translated "abide" or "remain" or "hold to."

Dale Bruner, one of the best scholars of the New Testament, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, translates the word *ménō*, which is typically translated "remain" or "abide," as to "make your home" in Jesus' Word. Dr. Bruner points out that this is not a strenuous good work that Jesus is calling us to but a gift; it's an invitation. You "make your home" somewhere and that place is going to influence you: It's going to be the place where you rest, the place where you feed, the place where you interact with people, the place where you are filled with a set of values. It will shape your life.

I've got a good friend who lives south of Seattle, in Tacoma, named Elizabeth Klein. Every once in a while, Elizabeth will ask me, "Are you guys coming through Seattle anytime soon?" Or, "Are you going to Oregon and will you pass through Seattle?" We don't go to Seattle very often, but when we do, we will let her know. And

maybe it's our Canadian or Japanese reserve, but we'll typically say, "We're very glad to see you, but we're also glad to stay at a hotel." And she always says, "No, no, no. You stay with us." They've got a guest suite, and Elizabeth has this spacious home with a great view of the ocean; she lives right on Browns Point. She's an exquisite cook, she's a wise and warm person, and when we're with Elizabeth and Jeff and her family, we feel nourished, we feel uplifted, and we feel energized. It feels like a great gift.

When you "make your home" in Jesus' Word, you're going to feel nourished spiritually; you're going to feel rested. Even if Jesus' Word challenges you, if you follow it, you'll feel at rest in your soul, you'll feel peace, you'll feel uplifted, you'll feel energized – and you'll feel free.

So, practically speaking, what does it look like to actually make our home in Jesus' Word? in God's Word?

If you are newer to faith or if you are re-engaging your faith in God, one of the things that you might consider is getting a broad sweep of the Scriptures. A few years ago – some of you will remember if you've been around for a while – we launched an initiative here at Tenth called Practicing the Presence. We invited folks here to commit to spending at least fifteen minutes, four times a week, in a prayerful reading of Scripture. It was accessible, we felt, but also a significant challenge to commit to across a year. Out of a combined attendance of about 1,600 people at the time (combining all four of our services), we had about 1,200 people sign on, and at the end of the year, about 85% said they kept their commitment some or most of the time.

One of the most helpful tools that we provided during this time was a reading guide called The Essential 100 – the essential 100 Scriptures in the Bible – because we heard that some people had tried to read the Bible before— Some were reading it for the very first time, but among those who had tried to read the Bible in the past, they often got stuck in Leviticus. They were driving pretty well, then, "Oh, Leviticus," and their car started to sputter – and then it stalled and died in Numbers! *[The congregation laughs.]* Yes, yes, see? We did this for you! And I have a hard time in those books, too, let me say. So The Essential 100 was terrific. I think it's in your program. I know it's a little dark out there, but do you guys have it in your program? Okay, you got it.

If you are eager to get through Numbers and Leviticus and the Book of Ezekiel, if you want to read through the whole Bible, consider a Bible reading guide by a Scottish minister of the 19th century named Robert Murray M'Cheyne. He was Scottish. He sounds Scottish! I've used this on and off for years, and you've got options to read the Bible in one or two or three or four years.

One of the things that makes it difficult for people to understand the Bible is that it just seems so obscure in certain places, and one of the things that can really help is to get a little background on the cultural or historical context and the reason why an author was writing a book or a letter. One of the best books for helping us understand the background of the Bible so that we get its message is a book by a former professor of mine called *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*. I know it doesn't sound like a very exciting title, but it's actually a really good book by Gordon Fee, who taught at Regent College for many years, and Doug Stuart, my Old Testament professor at seminary.

So, I just commend these resources to you, especially if you're getting started in the Bible.

If you've been a follower of Jesus for a while and have read through the Bible several times, it may not be that helpful to try to read the Bible through again and again and again, from cover to cover. What may be more helpful for you, in my opinion, is to take a shorter passage of Scripture and meditate on it, maybe for a few days or even a few weeks – or maybe even for a season. If you're teaching the Bible, I think the sweep is good alongside the combination of meditation. But if you've read the Bible through before – you're a long-time follower of Jesus and

are pretty familiar with the Scriptures – consider meditating on a short passage and even memorizing some text.

This past summer, I memorized Psalm 90. (I'm not going to recite the whole Psalm tonight.) My grandmother had had a stroke and she died, so I was thinking about the brevity of life, and some of the words that really struck me from Psalm 90 are these:

Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

(Psalm 90:10)

Later in the Psalm, it says, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). I really pondered these words. “Teach me to number my days, God, that I might gain a heart of wisdom.” That was in the summer.

In the fall, I memorized a part of Isaiah 43, words that may be familiar to some of you, where God says:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

(Isaiah 43:1-2)

As I meditate on those words and as I reflect on them, I feel that with God I can face anything. Anything. They've really been uplifting.

And then the passage that's always close to my heart is John 15, where Jesus says:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ... [E]very branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

(John 15:1-5)

This may surprise you because I am a pastor, but from time to time, I have no idea what to pray; I just draw a blank. In those times, whether it's in the morning when I'm meditating or when I wake up in the middle of the night, I will often cite a Psalm that I have memorized or a passage from Isaiah or the very words of Jesus. It might be when I'm jogging in the morning with our puppy: I'll recall the words of Jesus, and as I recite them I'm thinking, “Wow! I am saying the very words that Jesus said.” Or, “I'm praying the very prayer that Jesus prayed”

because I know that he prayed the Psalms, and I just feel so in sync with Jesus Christ and, in that moment, so united with him because I am speaking the words that he actually spoke. It feels like such a gift.

Dr. Kelly McGonigal is a psychologist who teaches at Stanford. She points out that if you observe people carefully when they're in conversation, you will notice that if one person crosses their arms in the conversation, chances are pretty good that their conversation partner, moments later, will cross their arms, too. If you're watching someone having coffee together at Milano's or Starbucks – I know we've got some folks who work at Starbucks, so I thought that I'd better mention Starbucks; let's keep it at Starbucks! – and one of the people leans back, moments later her conversation partner may lean back, too. According to psychologists, we subconsciously tend to mimic the body language of the people with whom we are in conversation, and as we do that, we understand the other person better, we feel more rapport with that individual, and we feel more in sync with them. (By the way, Dr. McGonigal also points out that sometimes salespeople are trained to mimic your body language so they can influence you more – a little warning!)

If we look at what Jesus prayed and begin to pray those prayers, if we see what Jesus did in the Gospels and begin to mimic, even on a subconscious level, what he did, we are going to feel more rapport with Jesus, more in sync with him. We're saying, "Jesus, influence me more deeply." It's powerful.

This year, our emphasis is on Life Together. My colleague Ken Pierce and his small group love to say, "Life is better together!" Sometimes, truth be told, life is *harder* together. And I said, "If Life Together doesn't work, next year I promise we'll do Life Alone!"

Life Together can be harder, but Life Together is deeper, richer and more profoundly transformative. It's our prayer that as we do Life Together not only in our large group worship activities but also and especially in our small groups and our spiritual friendships, we will be mimicking the very thinking and the very actions of Jesus. As we see each other reflecting Jesus in how we interact and what we do and who we are, it's our prayer that we'll become more and more like Jesus through the influence of each other.

As I just suggested a few moments ago, psychologists point out that we tend to copy each other's behavior unconsciously. If you see someone reaching for a snack or a drink, you are more likely to reach for a drink or a snack yourself. Even emotions, according to social scientists, are contagious: Even if you've had a great weekend, when you go to work or school and someone is in a bad mood, that person can literally bring you down. Conversely, if you're with someone who is really grateful and joyful, you'll feel uplifted. The emotions of loneliness and happiness can be passed from friend to friend or from family to family – it's like a virus, which can be good or bad. It is our hope and prayer that as we do Life Together, we will be passing along the good virus of the gospel; that we will be so in sync with Jesus Christ as we see him in Scripture and as we pray his prayers that we will be contagious and infecting each other with the good virus of God.

If you want to become a person who experiences God in your everything, then "make your home" in Jesus' Word; become so attached to Jesus Christ that his truth becomes part of who you are and part of the way you live. May that truth begin to influence the people who are watching you, and may the truth that you see in others begin to influence you. *[A dog barks.]* Yeah, even the dog likes that! Is that Diego? Diego is saying, "Amen!"

"Make your home" in Jesus' Word, and you will really be Jesus' disciple. **"Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

Let's pray together.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28 NASB).

Jesus is saying, “‘Make your home’ with me, in my heart and in my Word.”

What might that look like for you?

Perhaps for some of us here, it might mean diving into The Essential 100.

For some of us who know Jesus and have known him for years, it might mean meditating on or perhaps even memorizing a passage of Scripture that will be part of you for the rest of your life and for eternity. It’s not as hard as it sounds. I’ve got a bad memory – contrary to some myth – and if I can memorize passages, then you can, too, and it will be a gift that will bear fruit in your life forever.

How is Jesus speaking to you? Respond as he invites you into the home of his Word.

[silence]

And we pray these things in the name of the living Word, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, our friend – our liberator.

Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How can apparent freedom lead to bondage?
- How does being bound to Jesus bring real freedom?

RECOMMENDED READING

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.

Shigematsu, Ken. “Nourishing Your Soul through Sacred Reading.” *God in My Everything*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

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