

This story is proof that St. John the Evangelist has a sense of humor. To say, “We Jews have never been slaves to anyone” is nonsense. Jewish history is defined by captivity: slavery in Egypt, exile in Babylon, and—except for about 50 years as an independent state under the Maccabees—a parade of foreign rulers.

I think St. John throws this joke in here to make us laugh at ourselves. It is plainly ridiculous for Jews to say “we have never been slaves to anybody;” and John’s point is that it is equally ridiculous for us to say it. We are just as convinced of that truth as were the folks who were talking to Jesus, but we are also just as wrong. It doesn’t just have to do with sin, as Jesus says, but with lots of things.

One of the reasons we read this text on Reformation Sunday is that it reminds us of our freedom from the legalistic attitude of the medieval Catholic Church—that idea that we can only be saved by obeying God’s list of rules. While it’s easy for us to cast aspersions on the Pope Leo and the Catholic Church of the 16th Century, we would do well to remember that the Church didn’t intend to be corrupt. It was not the malicious leadership of terrible people who created that system, but the earnest, genuine desire by well-meaning people to be nearer to God and to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. The pope and the Church cultivated that legalism as a means to encourage people to live godly lives. What Luther and his colleagues realized was that instead of freeing people from sin and evil, the Church was simply imposing a different sort of captivity.

The confounding thing is that even while captivity is stifling, it can also be comforting. We take strength and pride from our traditions, having a familiar pattern to follow gives us confidence. It becomes very hard for us to tell when the systems and institutions we have built to protect ourselves start becoming more harmful than helpful. The Reformation is just one example of the ongoing human struggle to reshape our institutions as we grow beyond them.

Today that struggle continues. We see it now playing out in our federal government, in our immigration policy, in race and gender relations, and many other places. In the Church, that struggle takes the shape of a general rejection of organized religion in favor

of a personalized kind of spirituality. More people feel captive to the system as it exists, and are seeking to gain freedom from it.

Those of us in the Church find ourselves standing with the medieval Catholics and the Jews in John's gospel, saying, "What do you mean by saying, 'you will be made free?' We have never been slaves to anyone!" and it sounds just as silly when we say it. Lutherans can sometimes be among the worst about this; we claim to enjoy liberation from religious legalism, but we are unable to see just how tightly we are bound to a specific tradition. In spite of the fact that a growing number of Lutherans in North America are no longer from Scandinavian or German backgrounds, in many congregations Lutheranism remains synonymous with Oktoberfest or Lutefisk. Our denomination, the ELCA, is 98% White; the African Methodist Episcopal Church at 94% Black is more racially diverse than we are. Whether we realize it or not, Lutheranism in America is held captive to Northern European identity, and to Whiteness.

My point is that St. John's punchline is intended not only to make us laugh, but to also make us look at ourselves in the mirror and realize that there are things which may be holding us captive that we do not even see. It may be that our imaginations are captive to "the way we've always done things," or that our experience of Church is captive to certain cultural or racial stereotypes we do not even recognize. We are as enslaved as we have ever been, just as in need of freedom as those poor, oblivious people in St. John's story.

So how can we free ourselves from those things that bind us? How do we stop celebrating a 500-year-old monk and actually keep reforming the Church and ourselves? The fact is that we can't: "We confess that we are captive to these things and cannot free ourselves." The solution, Jesus says, lies in knowing the truth. But what is the truth?

When we read this story, the word that most catches our attention is "freedom;" but I think the real key lies in another word, one that is often obscured by our English translations. It is a word that is sprinkled liberally throughout John's gospel; a theme that runs like a red thread through his entire narrative. That word is "abide." Actually, there are lots of ways to render it in English: "abide," "dwell," "remain," "continue," "belong,"

“endure...” They are all translations of the same Greek word that St. John uses over and over and over again.

You’ve heard it in lots of different places throughout John’s gospel. At Jesus’ baptism, John sees “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it *remained* on him.” (1.32) “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that *endures* for eternal life” (6.27), and “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide* in me, and I in them.” (6.56) “In my Father’s house, there are many *rooms*.” (14.2) “*Abide* in me as I *abide* in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it *abides* in the vine, neither can you unless you *abide* in me.” (15.4)

St. John uses this word on many different levels. It is often literally means where a person is or where they are staying, but it also has a sense of intimacy, of connection, of belonging, of endurance. In today’s story, it shows up when Jesus says, “If you *abide* in my word, you are my disciples,” and “a slave does not *abide* in the house, but the son *abides* there forever.”

The truth, then, is not a doctrine to be believed or a tradition to follow or a set of rules to obey. We so often reduce truth to these things because it’s much easier that way. We think that if we believe the correct thing or do the correct thing or belong to the correct thing, we will be free from fear, from death, from condemnation. Instead, faith is not about obedience to law or doctrine, it is not the claiming of an identity (like being a descendant of Abraham or a Lutheran). Freedom doesn’t come through obedience or service; it comes through relationship. The truth Jesus wants us to know isn’t a fact, but a person. He wants to abide in us, and for us to abide in him.

St. Paul says the same thing with different words when he writes that we are saved by the faithfulness of Christ rather than by our own works. It is what Jeremiah imagines when he says that God will write the law on our hearts. We mostly think of freedom as the state of being unhindered by other people or considerations, but Jesus says freedom is not the ability to escape the house, but rather the ability to become part of the family. Families are bound together by love and concern for one another; being bound to God and to one another in that way is how Jesus offers freedom.

Legalism—like the legalism of the medieval Catholic Church—is a quick and dirty way to approximate relationship. We like it because it's easy for us to adhere to a list of expectations, and because of that even the gospel message of “saved by grace through faith” often becomes just another form of legalism in the sense that we derive from it the command to “believe” certain things about God in order to be saved. We prefer laws written on stone tablets where we can easily see them.

God offers us something much more freeing—and much more difficult. Instead of writing the truth on tablets of stone for us to read and follow, God writes the truth on our hearts. Jesus comes to teach us not to be obedient, but to trust, to have faith. Freedom comes not from following laws or memorizing proverbs, but from abiding as a part of God's house.

That's what we celebrate today, what we celebrate every day we gather. As we come together around this table and this font, as we lift our voices in songs of praise, we celebrate that in Christ, God abides with us, and we abide with God—and with one another. The law of love has been written on our hearts in love: “we love because God first loved us.” We have grace not because of what we believe or what we do or who we are or where we come from, but only because God chooses to give it. God washes us, God feeds us, God loves us; and that love frees us to abide with God and one another as one human family in God's name forever.

That's the freedom we celebrate today: not the freedom that liberates us from all obligations, but the freedom of God which binds us together in love, the freedom to abide with God and one another. This is the freedom which makes us one, which allows us to serve one another and care for each other knowing that God's family always has our back—and that we have theirs. That is the freedom of the cross.