

Sermon for Reformation Sunday

The Text: John 8:31-36

Bluey was the cherished family budgie, kept in a cage in the dining room. During the day Bluey was placed outside in his cage so that he could get some sunlight and fresh air. One Saturday Bluey's cage was discovered in pieces on the back door mat. The wind, or a cat must have knocked the cage off of the stool, and it fell apart. There was seed and feathers everywhere. And there was Bluey—outside of the cage, having a casual alfresco breakfast on the terrace.

Family members desperately wanted to catch Bluey, but they knew the minute they would open the door that Bluey would fly off. But what else could be done? As quietly and as slowly they could, the sliding door was opened...but it was a vain attempt. Bluey just looked at them for half a second, as if to tease with the thought that there was actually a chance of catching him, then simply turned his back and flew straight up into a huge tree in the car park. Short of a cherry picker, there was no way he could be reached, let alone captured. Family members ran outside calling him: "Bluey...Bluey." Bluey responded by chirping a proud affirmation of his independence...he wasn't coming home any time soon. He was staying in that tree. Bluey was free.

The irony for Bluey was that being free in the big wide world actually meant that he was trapped by it. He had been chosen from the pet shop and was made a part of the family. He was given a home, with all the food and the safety he needed. The odds of a domesticated budgie surviving for any decent length of time in the big wide world with a host of stray cats about, was desperately low. This was a matter of life and death. Seed was brought, heaped up on saucers with some of those special bell shaped budgie treats, but still Bluey wouldn't come. We kept calling Bluey...but he never came.

Bluey didn't want to come back, because he thought he was already free. This was the same thought of the Jews in John's Gospel today: "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"
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It's interesting that in their response, the Jews didn't just say they were free. They pointed to their Abrahamic ancestry. On a purely biological level, this *is* true—they *are* descendants of Abraham. But the meaning they attached to being Abraham's descendants goes well beyond genetics. The Jews' identity was wrapped up in Abraham. They asserted they had the rightful claim to belong to God's family based on ancestry and quite apart from any faith shown in love. To them, Abraham was like the membership card to heaven in their jacket pocket. "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

Jesus immediately replies: "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." These people may well not be slaves in a master-household servant context, but Jesus is talking about something far more binding, with eternal consequences. "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin." A person's particular sins can only come from a sinful nature. Only those in slavery to sin actually sin.

In our natural condition all of us are slaves to a will that seeks independence from God to sin, which the Apostle Paul tells us results in death. Luther spoke of the bondage of the will; our human nature curved in on itself. This means that, like Bluey with newfound independence, and like the Jews in today's text, we are incapable of comprehending in our natural state that we need freedom from the things that enslave. We are like the hunter Narcissus in Greek Mythology, who was so captivated by his own reflection in a pool of water that he was unable to draw himself away from the pool and stared at his reflection until he died.

What a dire predicament to be in! If we are enslaved ourselves, how can we free ourselves from such entanglement? Thank God that freedom has always been his concern. Way back in Exodus 20 God said: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." It wasn't Abraham that set the Jews free. It was God.

And God didn't rest once he had freed his people Israel, but from the many descendants promised to Abraham came the Saviour of the world. God poured out the fullness of his grace upon the world through his Son, bringing divine rescue and help for a human race unworthy of such compassionate love, and unable to help itself. Jesus says today: "...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

At the time of the Reformation, the people were in slavery in a different way. The church taught that salvation and freedom from sin, death and the devil could be earned, or bought with indulgences, official church documents which guaranteed forgiveness of sins either for the person buying one, or a departed relative. These indulgences were the ultimate religious insurance policy: pay now, sin later, and still live at peace with your conscience.

But it *didn't* ease people's consciences, especially those who were too poor to present such an offering. It didn't ease the burden of guilt and shame, because there is never any certainty of right standing before God through human effort, and works always require more works. The Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, himself struggled with questions like: "How can I be sure that God forgives *my* sins?" "Where can *real* comfort for a guilty conscience be found?" He was wracked by guilt and tormented by the devil, and longed to know a loving God.

Then Luther discovered the joy of the Gospel—that there is a righteousness apart from the law, for God so loved the world that he sent his own Son Jesus to do that which is impossible for any person to do—to take away our sin and its consequences of death

and eternal separation from God by his own death, so that through faith alone in his work we are declared righteous in God's sight for Jesus' sake, and have personal access to his grace and peace.

We do not have to pay the price for our sin, and indeed cannot, because no monetary amount could ever be enough. But thanks be to God that his Son Jesus, the Lord Christ has paid the price for us, with his own holy and precious blood. Luther was grieved to see that the church itself was letting go of Jesus' words, and holding to a whole host of new teachings of their own making. So in 1517, Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. The Reformation had begun.

Today, here in our supposedly free nation of Australia, the church is faced with uncertainty over its religious freedoms like never before. The freedom God has won for us is always freedom *from* something *for* something. It has been since ancient times, when God proclaimed to his people: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" and then gave them his commandments to show them his will for their life and to protect the gifts he wanted to bless them with.

For Luther, religious freedom was about standing up for God's truth, and correcting what was wrong, even when that was a very real risk to his own life. For the church in today's age, freedom doesn't mean embracing the rising tide of society's agenda, but it means stacking the sandbags high against it. As some debate whether God's word is still relevant for today's issues or simply bound to the culture of its day, surely God's word is not chained by culture, but free to shape culture. For through his word God's Kingdom does come to rule in the hearts of his people, bringing freedom to hear the Scriptures as Christ's voice for his church throughout every age. Jesus says in today's text: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

When we hear in our hearts God's law which demands perfect obedience in thought word and deed, we will know that the need for repentance goes on every single day of our lives, and we will understand how much we need to hear the sweet and comforting sound of the gospel which urges us to no longer look to ourselves and what lies within us, but to listen to Jesus only.

Our freedom is not found in relabelling our sin with softer, more acceptable language. Our freedom is not in justifying our sin based on what we think others might deserve, or what we might need. Our freedom is not found in covering up our sin; sweeping it under the carpet until the storm blows over. Our freedom is found in the Christ who hears our confession and forgives us by disentangling our sin from us and taking it upon himself; who takes away our guilt, and who hides our shame in his own wounds, who frees us to show his incomprehensible love and compassion to all those around us, and bring the hope we have in God, to those who have no hope at all.

Unlike calling to Bluey which failed to bring him back, God's calling of us was powerful and effective, accomplishing his will for us. He called us by name to our Saviour Christ through the Gospel, so that we would personally receive the redemption he won for the world, freeing us from the chains of sin, its wages of death, the condemnation of the law, and the power of the devil and his accusations.

The Holy Spirit sanctified us in Christ's truth as his brothers and sisters, those who share in his holiness and also have a place in heaven. That's what Jesus promises to us: "Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Other than receiving the wages that are due, a servant does not receive the privileges of the family that children do. A servant has no permanent place in a family's household, but comes and goes as they are directed. Through faith in Christ God declares that each one of us are his righteous and holy children, and he invites us to come before his throne of grace, not as servants, but as members of his own family. He invites us to come as those who share in Jesus' own death and resurrection and therefore also his inheritance, so that we also may have the joy of being in God's glorious presence forever.

That is why he sent his Son to die on the Cross for us—to pay in full what God has given to us as a free gift....no other payments required. The Son has set us free, and we are free indeed. Amen.