

We are Free!
Luke 13:10-17

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Imagine if you will, a man in prison. Not a modern prison, but one of those stone, cold, dark, wet, cells of the medieval ages – a dark cell 8 feet by 6 feet. Now this man is kept there deep down below the ground, shackled to the wall by his ankle, just enough slack in the chain that he can reach the slot in the door where they slide bowls of smelly food and foul water through and enough slack to lay up against the wall to where he calls his bed. He is there for life, imprisoned as a teenager and ever since for decades. No hope of parole, no hope of escape, no hope of ever seeing day light again, no hope whatsoever.

Now imagine that someone with a large ring of keys and wearing a uniform arrives outside the door of his prison cell. Taking the large ring of keys he hunts for the seldom used key and unlocks the door. With the hinges squeaking from rust, the visitor pushes with all his strength to open the door. For the first time in a long time the prisoner sees a man come in to his cell and approach him. Kneeling down, the man finds the right key and unshackles the prisoner, telling him that he is free. The man then stands and walks out leaving the cell door wide open repeating the same procedure at the next cell and the next and the next.

What will the man do? Will he dance and sing for joy? Will he run out of the cell to the light of the sun and freedom? Or will he crawl out of the cell and slowly make his way to freedom? Perhaps he will fall on his knees and give thanks to God?

Or Perhaps the prisoner will not do any of those things. After a lifetime in that dark, cold prison, perhaps even at the words you are free, will instead stay right there in the cell. Even though the chains are loose and the door is open, he continues to live as if he had never been set free. He stays locked away by his own choice not to accept that freedom.

Now compare that story to a story of a church much like ours. – A nice church, a respectable church. One Sunday the people of that congregation gathered together in their Sunday best, when a man walked into the sanctuary who just didn't seem to belong. He was scruffy in appearance and ragged in dress. He didn't have on the nice suite. He didn't drive a nice car. He was gruff and loud with his greeting to the ushers. The head usher figuring the man to be a homeless vagrant, eyed him up and down handing him a bulletin and motioning where he could sit in the sanctuary, a nice out of the way place. Ignoring the usher's suggestion, the visitor boldly stomped right down the center aisle all the way to the very front

pew, where he planted himself almost sinking down into the pew. So far so good, the ushers thought as they kept a watch on that man. The service began and the music was sung, and then the pastor got up to preach. Now when the preacher emphasized a strong point of his sermon, everyone heard the newcomer shout "Hallelujah". The minister gave him a stern look and continued on. Not a moment or two later, the visitor interrupted him again, and shouted "Praise be to God." One of the ushers came hurrying down the aisle and whispered to the man as nicely and sternly as he could that, "we don't do that here!" "But I've got religion," the man objected. The usher calmly without missing a beat, said, "Yes sir, I'm sure you do. but you didn't get it here."

Two stories of people being set free. Two totally different understandings of life. One of a man who is locked away and afraid to see the possibility of freedom by walking out the door. The other a congregation of people afraid locked away in tradition afraid to see the possibility in expressing one's faith. Two stories of people being set free but still locked away.

Our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning is all about being set free, also. A woman came to the place where Jesus was. She was imprisoned by a crippled body, for eighteen years she was not able to straighten up. Perhaps she had advanced osteoporosis or severe arthritis. Maybe she had an injury of some kind of paralysis. All we do know is that for eighteen long years this woman and been held captive by her ailment.

Then one Sabbath day, while Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, he sees this woman appear crippled, stomped over and in pain. Jesus called her over, she doesn't ask, or beg or holler for freedom. Jesus sees her and calls her over, putting his hands on her and saying, woman you are set free from your ailment. Immediately she stands straight, her back healed. No longer crippled or plagued by discomfort or pain, but free. What a miracle!

But not everyone is happy. The religious leaders that were present were upset. The laws clearly state no work should be done on the Sabbath. The woman could have waited until the next day. She has been sick eighteen years, what's another day, her life wasn't in danger. She could wait to be free.

But Jesus' response to the leader of the synagogue, drives home the point to this story. You Hypocrites, Jesus calls them. These are not his enemies. These might have been friends, or even some followers. After all he had just been teaching them and they had just been listening to him in the synagogue on the Sabbath, he had been given a place of honor in the service of the day. But then he crossed the line, he broke tradition, he broke from what they had always done and knew to be their Sabbath day. So the leaders is upset, indignant. So

Jesus calls him and anyone that agrees like him a Hypocrite. A hypocrite is simply a pretender, a person who pretends to be one way but is actually another. The religious leader pretends to honor God and be a minister of God in proper worship and rightly said prayers, but he is so caught up into the proper traditions and laws, that he forgets to be a minister of love of God for his people.

To make his point even clearer, Jesus states an example. Knowing the laws of the ten commandments as the law given to Moses and the people of Israel, and the hundreds of laws written by man to define what those ten meant, Jesus explains their hypocrisy. Keep the Sabbath day and make it holy is understood, but the man made laws defining how this is done were pretty detailed. An animal of the field needed water even on the Sabbath, so it was allowed that a person could lead an animal to water and it was not considered work, but a person could not lift the bucket to the animal's mouth that would have been considered work and not allowed. But if you think about it an animal stuck in the heat and sun, like a donkey or mule would have no problem bending their neck to drink from the bucket. You see they had put loopholes into the understanding of the laws to care for the animals, especially since animals cost a lot of money and it wasn't a good idea to let one die of thirst simply because it was the Sabbath. Being kind to one of God's lowly creatures took precedence over the Sabbath. So why not lead a beloved child of God, this woman away from crippling bondage and give her healing on the Sabbath day? If you can loose an animal on the Sabbath day to find life providing water, why not loose a woman to stand up straight and know the water of life on the Sabbath.

Jesus told the woman, "You are set free" a physical ailment. But also Jesus is mentally trying to free the witnesses present, to hear the good news of God's coming kingdom. To know of God's love for his people. To know that nothing can separate them.

That same message can be told to us this day, You are free. You are free, We are set free. The work has been done already. The fine has been paid, to get out of prison. Jesus Christ paid the price at Calvary and you are set free.

But the problem many people have in this world is that we don't hear the message. We are like that prisoner I first told you about today, we are still locked away, the door might stand open, and the shackles are off, but we still lock ourselves away from God by holding on to our sins, grudges, heartaches, resentments, angers, doubts. Whatever that holds us back from fully grasping on to God's gift. We pretend that we believe, we are hypocritical saying I believe, but we still hold back part of ourselves, not fully trusting, not fully sharing the grace of God with others. We keep it locked up. We become like that congregation in that second story I shared

with you, We stand and sing somewhat the hymns, we pray, we say the words written in the bulletin for us to say, and we receive with open hands the very real presence of God in the Holy Communion. But we are not going to go outside our comfort zone and express our freedom in faith with the world. We keep living our faith as if it is a coat, that we put on when we need it and take it off when we don't.

But Christ's promise of setting us free goes beyond the coat layer, beyond our skin, into our very mind, hearts, and soul. We are set free to be a people of God, dramatically changed and energized, renewed and given a purpose, by God's grace we are to work to fulfill the kingdom of God as God's servants in all that we are, in all that we say, in all places we go. You are free, live in that freedom! Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.
AMEN.