

## **"Freedom"**

John 8:31-36

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Third in a series of four sermons on *The Shack*

**To the Jews who had believed 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."**

**They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"**

**Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 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.**

*The truth will set you free.* One of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great martyrs, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said this is perhaps the most revolutionary phrase in the entire New Testament. To illustrate his point, Bonhoeffer told a story that sounds a little like *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a story about freedom and truth.

In it, a group of adults are talking. In the course of their discussion, someone brings up a subject which is very painful for some in the group. It could be politics, or religion, or something of a more personal nature. The discussion turns into a very heated argument, full of lies and anger.

A little child happens to be there, overhearing the whole angry exchange. The child of course does not grasp the entire situation. Yet the child knows something the others all know, but *are afraid to mention*. The child is puzzled that the grownups don't seem to know what he knows. All of the sudden, he blurts it out. The emperor has no clothes on!

An embarrassed silence comes over the group. The child looks around in surprise. The adults stare at the child in confusion. The child laughs. She is happy! She has said something that stopped the anger. Something has happened that cannot be undone.

Quite suddenly the adults' hypocrisy is completely exposed. Through this child, the truth has come to light. The word of the child has unmasked it. It happened by the laughing, fearless child, who described the thing that

bothered him, the truth the grownups were unable to say. Only the child was free.<sup>1</sup>

Are you truly free? I like to think I am, but I know I am not. I am not, because I am still a slave to sin. I am not, because I resist the truth. I am not, because so often I try to be so independent. I end up returning to sin, again and again.

We can all relate to Paul when he says in Romans, “Oh, what a wretched person I am! What I do is not the good I want to do. No! The evil that I don’t want to do—this is what I keep on doing!” (paraphrase of Romans 7:24, 19) Oh yes, we are right there with you, Paul. If we tell the truth, we must admit---often it seems we are not free, not free at all.

The biblical view of freedom is (like the biblical view of truth) revolutionary. It is radically different from what most of us think of when we think of freedom. The Bible holds that freedom is connected to truth, and truth is connected to Christ. The Bible makes a link between freedom and obedience. At first glance, this seems paradoxical, doesn’t it? We tend to think of freedom **from** laws, not freedom **for** laws! Biblical freedom is in the context of right relationship with God. In order to be free, we have to freely surrender to God. When we surrender and trust, then we are free. When we do not, we are enslaved.

Paul Young, the author of *The Shack*, recognizes the dilemma freedom presents to us. So often we misuse our freedom. We defy God’s truth. So often we fail to trust in God. When we do this, we are bound to suffer. In the book, Papa talks to Mack about how human choices contribute to suffering. Papa remembers when he gave humans the gift of free will. Papa explains he did this because he wanted real relationships with people. Mack wants Papa to take back some of this freedom, to eliminate evil consequences. Mack wants to ‘have his cake and eat it, too.’ Papa replies,

*If I take away the consequences of people’s choices, I destroy the possibility of love. Love that is forced is no love at all. (p. 190)*

God gives us freedom so that we might choose life and love! God knows we cannot truly love if we are forced into it. God does not desire robots. God desires a free and glad response. One of our Presbyterian catechisms says we were created by God to [love] God and enjoy God forever.<sup>2</sup> We were created to love God. The freedom God has given us makes it possible for us to actually do this.

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<sup>1</sup> P. 64 Paraphrase from story in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christmas Sermons.

<sup>2</sup> This is a liberal paraphrase of the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Somehow, though, we want our freedom but we also want God to fix things---to change the outcomes--- when we abuse our freedom! Sounds very childish when put that way, doesn't it?

Mack is angry with God for not fixing evil. Mack struggles mightily with this, as well as with his own suffering. Papa reminds Mack:

*Don't forget that in the midst of all your pain and heartache, you are surrounded by beauty, the wonder of Creation, art, your music and culture, the sounds of laughter and love, of whispered hopes and celebrations, of new life and transformation, of reconciliation and forgiveness. These also are the results of your choices and every choice matters, even the hidden ones.*

Papa challenges Mack to declare what Papa should have done differently.

*So whose choices should we countermand, Mackenzie? Perhaps I should never have created? Perhaps Adam should have been stopped before he chose independence? What about your choice to have another daughter, or your father's choice to beat his son? You demand your independence, but then complain that I actually love you enough to give it to you. (p. 191)*

Mack has been living as though he was completely independent. He has blamed God for Missy's death; he has not turned his grief over to God. Mack does not trust God. Mack has resisted trusting God for a long time. Finally it begins to dawn on Mack. He begins to see that all his supposed freedom was only slavery, and all his supposed truth was lies. Mack finally begins to understand what Papa had been trying to tell him all along. More importantly, Mack finally begins to understand what Papa had been yearning for all along---relationship.

It is only in relationship to God, that we truly become free. Paul Young says it beautifully in *The Shack*:

*. . . freedom is an incremental process. The Truth shall set you free and the Truth has a name; he's over in the woodshop right now covered in sawdust. Everything is about him. And freedom is a process that happens inside a relationship with him. (p. 95)*

Mack finally gets it. The Truth has a name. Freedom has a face.

Let us pray. God, protect us, that we are not misled by our false images of freedom and the temptation to remain in our lies. Release us from our stubborn independence into the loving embrace of your grace. Show us the truth that only you can give. Give us that freedom that throws us upon you and your grace. Lord, we wait upon your truth.