

Reformation Sunday

TRUE FREEDOM

John 8: 31-36

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Analysis by Robin J. Morgan

31Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." 33They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" 34Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

DIAGNOSIS: Who Are You?

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Confusion*

In chapters seven and eight of John, Jesus has been in dialogue with the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees and the crowds. They challenge whatever he says and obviously don't understand his words, even asking him in 8:25, "Who are you?" Jesus responds, "Why should I talk to you at all?"

Now in 8:31-36, he is finally talking to those who believe in him. One would assume they will understand and yet they are as clueless as the others. When he tells them that by following him and being his disciples they will know the truth and be made

free, they balk: "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone," they say, implying that, even though they believe in him, they still are depending on their status as Abraham's descendants for the shape of their lives and their relationship with God. Truth and freedom are theirs through blood, not through Jesus' word or by following him. Though these "believers" think they know who he is, obviously the reality of Jesus as the Word of God, the light of the world, has not penetrated their understanding. Dialogue with them is no different than with those who are consciously aware that they don't know who he is.

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Self-Willed Ignorance*

What may have been going on inside of those believers that provokes their challenge of Jesus' words is not recorded here, but extrapolating from our own experiences makes hypothesizing fairly simple. We might say, "Jesus was a wonderful teacher so of course we can learn from his words. We should follow his example of compassion and caring for others, but that doesn't mean he changed the underlying dynamics of the world. After all, he was just a man." Or, if we accept that Jesus is God's Son, still we live as functional atheists, allowing the underlying dynamics of our culture to shape our lives and our relationship with God. "The church is a business after all. Keep the spiritual where it belongs, in the worship service. We make decisions based on the 'bottom line.'" Descendants of Abraham? Maybe not in bloodline, but certainly in the heart.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Permanently in the Dark*

"Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Jesus pulls no punches in making clear what their standing is before God: "The slave has no permanent place in the household." Their bloodline assures them of nothing.

PROGNOSIS: The Son Forever

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Way*

Jesus allows himself to descend into our darkness, taking our arrogant ignorance, confusion, and sin to himself on the cross and gives us instead his truth, his freedom, his permanent place in God's household. He continues to speak his word to us and call us to his side. Our relationship with God can now be based on Christ's work on our behalf and the reality of the Holy Spirit rather than any particular DNA or action on our part.

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Truth*

But is it true? Can we trust that he is indeed who he says he is? His willingness to live with us, teach us, preach to us, heal us, and then make the ultimate sacrifice of giving his life so that we might have a permanent place in God's household with him, back up his words. Becoming his disciples opens to each of us a whole new relationship with God and life—one based on mercy, rather than judgment.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Life*

Having a permanent place in God household, knowing the truth that sets us free, these are now the foundation upon which we build our lives. Disciples imitate their master and we are called to imitate Christ: teaching, preaching, healing, living our lives with the compassion and mercy that he has given to us. We are free to live as he does—speaking the truth, being the truth wherever we go, whatever we do.