

Reformation Sunday

HAVING A FREE PLACE

John 8:31-36

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Analysis by Michael Hoy

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: The Bondage of Religion, or Un-religion, Whatever

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Protesting the Truth*

Somewhere, perhaps in singing some majestic lyrics like "the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord," some – maybe we – will object: One foundation? Surely, you jest. Haven't we placed our eggs enough times in one basket only to see them broken or crushed. (Consider nest eggs on Wall Street as an example. There are many other places where dreams have been lost as well.) So when we hear the promise, "the truth will make you free," something we have heard spoken by countless others over

the years, even over centuries, from which we may have historical amnesia from our senses being so dulled (as it was also for Jesus' critics), might we not think we have heard this all before and say, Thanks, but no thanks? Instead, there is bristling. "We are descendants of Abraham.... What do you mean, 'you will be made free'?" It's this truth, this truth in Jesus, that bothers them. Maybe us, too.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Slaves

So as we go about turning back walking or driving the streets with our cell phones planted to our ears or with thumbs text-messaging at a fast and furious pace, that even the bristling gives way to just tuning it out altogether. We're not really interested in all this religion-stuff. (Truth is, neither was Jesus, but that may also go unheard with all our background noise.) And yet, even that conclusion earns us a state of being: You are slave-one outside the household. Given some of the characters in the household, some may consider that the better place to be. But left unexplored are the values that still drive our sorry state of existence; perhaps also unexplored are the non-values (like despair) that never get voiced.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : No Permanent Place

Jesus describes us, therefore, by what we do not have: "The slave does not have a permanent place in the household." Our place has been lost, maybe given to another. What we "have" is no lasting place. And lo and behold, not only is this true in some future afterlife, but we experience it by what we already seem to "have" now in the land of despair and frustration and confusion. Where is God? No answer.

PROGNOSIS: The Freedom of Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Placed in Our No Place

But God knows this lack of permanence well. In fact, God

experienced it first hand in Jesus: This One who also has faced the same threat of impermanence, experienced the worst of it in a place we would not likely put at the top of our “best places to visit”: Golgotha is the pits. But here’s the catch. It wasn’t what he deserved; Golgotha (that is, death) is our pits that he’s accepted intentionally, asking as we do, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We have to wait a few days to hear the full answer to that query. But what is powerful is how in this moment Jesus is empowering us, by taking our place – sharing in our lot, as lasting as it is – so that we can, instead, have his lot-a lasting permanent place of promise forever. His life given for ours, is the cornerstone (foundation), where God’s legal permanency is overcome by God’s promising new beginning.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Children*

Instead of being abandoned-living by some vague impression that we have to be “true” to ourselves (whether that be our heritage or our disinterest in the divine)-we become God’s own kids. Now we have something we didn’t have before this placeless One came to change life for our good. He takes our place of crushed non-existence into his hands, and hugs us into a place that we can call home – meaningful home and belonging – with God, as God’s treasured own. Trust starts to re-kindle. Hope starts to emerge.

Step 6: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *Professing the Faith*

And maybe then, our voices crack a bit, and we sing the words with new force, “the church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.” I can trust this One, after all, because he’s known my no-place. So the foundation is not me, not some contemporary I have idolized, not some ancestor like Martin or Abraham (all of whom knew better anyway), but the One who came into my no-place and somehow died it out of existence so that I may be valued at home, with God. He gives being again; truth-fully, he makes me

free.