

Reformation Sunday, Gospel Year C

WHO REALLY BENEFITS HERE?

John 8:31-36

Reformation Sunday

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." 33 They 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'?" 34 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. 37 I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. 38 I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father."

Author's Note: Verses 31-33 recount an odd interaction between Jesus and "the Jews who had believed in him." These seem less likely to be scribes and more likely to be anonymous folks in the crowd. Not that faithful folks never balk at Jesus' accusation. We might consider old versus new creation or cognitive dissonance. Grammatical debates float around these verses as well (see Gerald Sloyan's Interpretation commentary on John, p. 102: the force of perfect participles and so forth). Rather than risk a tangent, let's just consider Jesus as a strange voice from outside, for our purpose here.



DIAGNOSIS: Trying to Change the World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Surviving the Day

For Jesus' audience, Jewish identity isn't just a matter of faith or religious practice. It's a matter of survival, a means of rebellion against an Empire hell-bent on consuming everything and everyone in its path in order to cement its power. For these folks, their Jewishness testifies, "We are not one of you. We will not be overcome." Of course, we know how that will play out in a few years, but as for this day, taxes demand payment and folks need to eat. Rome has been relatively lenient for a few decades by allowing some degree of Jewish independence, at least as long as taxes and GDP flow uphill. Meanwhile, Herod Antipas is making Judea great again with so many building projects (i.e., "job creation"). So, perhaps these folks really can make a way without sacrificing their vital identity. Yet the question remains, "who really benefits here?"

Our situation isn't much different. We live in a web of human institutions, whether global corporations or small businesses, or even congregations with payrolls. We still have to make a living and survive the day, and no one else is going to take care of us. In one way or another, the fruits of our labors still manage to flow upward, but who can really track where all that goes anyway? It's above our paygrade.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Pushing for Change

Of course, we're anxious about compromise. We strive to bring our Christian principles to redeem the enterprise by all manner of social action. We choose political affiliations, we boycott, we push our churches toward socially-responsible investing. But somehow we're never sure we're pushing in the right direction. We're always shocked by another controversy rearing up. We can't figure out where our advocacy ends and virtue signaling begins. And in this gnawing uncertainty, Jesus comes along and proclaims, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples." But we don't hear the rest, because what true disciple would let themselves be distracted by personal piety when the fate of the world is at stake?

In this way, we often hear Jesus' audience balk at his exhortation and read this as obsession with personal righteousness or privileged ancestry. They retort, "We are descendants of Abraham." But who is to say that they aren't claiming their identity as a living proof that the empire can't win, even if they can't escape their position within it? No wonder they retort that they "have never been slaves to anyone." This would mean everything has been for naught, and the thought is unacceptable.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Fading Away

Still, Jesus continues, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” There is no escaping our collusion with the empire, the endless ways we can’t help but sustain it in one way or another. Sure, we protest, but deep down we know this is not enough. The rich still get richer, the poor still get poorer, and before God we will answer for all of it. Worse, Jesus says, “The slave does not have a permanent place in the household,” and we know he’s right. Our campaigns and causes will fade into history as surely as will our own bodies. And Jesus doesn’t fare any better on the cross. “I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word.”

PROGNOSIS: The World Becomes Changed



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Raised to New Life

But this is not the last word. Jesus promises, “The son has a

place there forever.” He will die, but after three days be raised in the glory of the resurrection. Death will be no more, because he binds our sin and failure to his own body in order to bind the power of his resurrection to us. And we will be raised to new life with him by the power of his unconditional forgiveness; this is the living Word by which he surely makes a place for us. History will be no more. Empire will be no more. But the Son’s place in the household will be always and forever.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Feeling Free to Fail

This Son, who has a permanent place in the household, imparts his Holy Spirit. No longer slaves to sin, we are free to live as Christ’s siblings, children who have a place with God forever. And knowing the place he has made for us, we become disciples, set free by his truth. By this gift of faith, we behold the kingdom of God breaking in even now. Of course, life still has its crises; we lament the world’s suffering and our own limitations. But even our brokenness testifies to the fact that nothing is beyond the reach of Jesus’ redemption. He promises, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” This truth gives us the freedom to fail; finally we know that the last word does not begin or end with us. We are freed by a courageous and unsinkable hope that somehow, in the shelter of Christ, the empire is crumbling away even though we don’t understand exactly how.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Giving Ourselves Away

But as for this day, taxes still demand payment and neighbors still need to eat. So, we will pitch in wherever we find ourselves, in ways both familiar and unexpected. But it’s not about political statements, or t-shirts with slogans, or proving

that Christians have some kind of edge on community service. We don't have to prove to anyone what kind of disciples we are, because we'll give ourselves away, precisely by giving ourselves away. We certainly don't have to prove anything to Jesus, because he knows exactly what kind of disciples we are—the ones he's called by name. Granted, the world's still a complicated place for disciples, full of daily challenges and ethical dilemmas. We know the fruits of our labors will still flow upward in troubling ways we don't understand. But we also know that they flow outward to our neighbors for their benefit—and that's all that really matters to us. Because, they too are the children of God. We have heard it from the Father.