

July 7, 2019

*“The Truth Shall Set You Free”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 8:31-32

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As I mentioned last week, this summer we'll be looking at some of the wonderful promises of our Almighty God and Lord Jesus Christ. And today's promise is the one we just heard, “If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

The truth shall set you free!

Now freedom is certainly what the Fourth of July is all about, and I hope everyone is having a wonderful Fourth of July weekend. I personally love the Fourth of July – it's the unofficial beginning of summer, it's warm, there are parades, fireworks, and of course, there's all the history that helps me remember the many freedoms we have and enjoy living here in this great country. Freedoms which I could otherwise easily take for granted. That's why I'm grateful for those events that started just up the road a bit in Boston almost two hundred and fifty years ago. Events that resulted in us being able to congregate here today in peace, worshipping as we wish. Try doing this in other areas of the world today, like the Middle East, China, or parts of Africa. And even though the politically correct thing to do in our country is to actively promote “separation of church and state,” I don't think it's a bad thing to let that line get a little fuzzy, especially during this week's holiday. Because, when it comes to speaking about truth, there are many spiritual truths we can learn from our founding fathers' quest for freedom. Let me share some thoughts. First, don't some parts of our Declaration of Independence echo many of the Biblical precepts that we Christians hold sacred? I mean, what speaks to human dignity better than these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” That resonates with all of us, doesn't it? And keep this in mind – the desire for freedom is not unique just to Americans. It is a universal desire of all of humankind from the very beginning. Because those same words, many in the very same context the founding fathers were suggesting, are seen over seven hundred times throughout the Bible. Just listen to some of the things Jesus said. “I came that the oppressed would be set free.” “I came to bring you life, *abundantly*.” “I have said these things that your happiness may be complete.” And speaking of equality, no one treated people more nobly than Jesus – men, women, rich, poor, the native, the foreigner, the faithful, the sinner. He treated them all the same, wanting the best for every person. Yes, in the Bible we find equality, life, liberty, happiness – all those self-evident truths, and more!

But here's a sobering thought. Political scientist John Hallowell claims that modern twenty-first century man has lost sight of these essential biblical truths. He asks the question, how could we have gone from the founding of this nation by individuals who believed fully in the greatness, power and sovereignty of God, to now becoming a people who either explicitly or implicitly, seem to deny the very same God. As a result, twenty-first century man and woman have no foundation for believing that all men are created equal, no basis for believing in basic human rights and dignity for all the world's inhabitants, and just as importantly, no spiritual starting point for believing in one's own self-worth. Once God was big in this country, and humankind was small. Now the general perception appears to be just the opposite. And as God has gotten smaller, or even been denied altogether, twenty-first century America has had to come up with some replacement.

And, I think you would agree, we've come up with some very unfortunate substitutes! There are those obvious ones - other people we've made into gods, like celebrities, sports stars and politicians. And we all aspire to the gods of power and money. But let me get more specific. How about the god of materialism? Things have got you down? Don't turn to the words and teachings of Jesus Christ. Instead, immerse yourself in new clothes, gadgets, or whatever will make you feel better about yourself. But then what happens? We become addicted to the euphoria our material possessions bring us, and, because they don't satisfy long term, we want more and bigger. So consumerism becomes a god. And as our culture becomes more tolerant of our self-absorbed lifestyle, relativism becomes our god. If it feels good, just do it. Right and wrong is all relative, depending on our situation. And because we have such a self-centered focus, we turn to the god of technology to support our views and desires. Consequently, we don't know how to live in community with each other or work collaboratively. And now we've become red states or blue states, but not the United States. We've become liberals who haven't liberated anyone from ignorance, oppression or poverty. We've become conservatives who haven't conserved any high standards or moral values. And the bottom line – the pursuit of happiness in the twenty-first century has led to discontent, and we feel burdened, stressed, weary and empty of any real purpose or meaning in our lives.

But there is a better way! The promise we heard today! “If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” Jesus knew that we people have a propensity to get ourselves lost following the wrong things - that's why he's known as the Good Shepherd who searches for the lost sheep. That's all of us! Jesus knew we people have a propensity to

get ourselves all worked up for the wrong reasons. That's why he said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." This friends, is a personal invitation for freedom. Because 'rest for your souls' means that we are free from burdens, free from stress, free from weariness. Jesus said, "learn from me." Learn his truths that will set you free.

For example – free from those false gods I mentioned that create our burdens. When we quit striving to be like other people, when we quit striving after things, when we quit striving to impress other people and instead focus on God and God's will and desire for our own life, we can find rest in the truth Christ said, "Your Father who is in heaven will give what is good to those who ask Him. So strive first for the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you." The truth will set you free.

Free from worry and fear. Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? The truth is, your heavenly Father knows what you need." Suffice it to say that the God whom the Bible says formed you in your mother's womb, formed you in his own image, the God who knows the number of hairs on your head, the God who cares for the birds of the air and the lilies in the field, this very same God loves and cares for you with a perfect love. Jesus said, "Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your heavenly Father knowing. So do not be afraid - you are more valuable than they. Do not worry about your life." That's a truth that will set you free.

Free from anger and resentment. So often we hold onto our hurts, reminding ourselves how someone has mistreated us. And anger and resentment builds. The world encourages us – take revenge, leave the relationship. But Jesus has a different truth. "Forgive seventy times seven. If you do not forgive others, your Heavenly Father will not forgive you." We hear in scripture – "revenge is mine," says the Lord, "I will repay." You see, we can be at rest, at peace with each other because we give it over to God. Let me share with you an example. A woman came to my office about a year ago, angry and upset with her adult daughter, the way the daughter was treating her, and the things she was doing. We talked for awhile and I suggested she pray for her daughter. She was surprised, and I could tell, not too excited about it. But she agreed to try. And just the other day she said that opening herself to the power of Christ through prayer made all the difference. She felt a release, a freedom from her anger and resentment, and now she feels free to love her daughter for who she is. Let me ask - is there a person you need to pray for? The truth will set you free.

Yes there are many spiritual truths Jesus taught that will give you life, liberty and help you pursue happiness. So as you leave here today, be aware that there are many ways in which this world will try to entrap you and enslave you. But if you know Jesus Christ, you know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Amen