

Amen. The word of God that we consider today is from the Gospel according to John, “[Jesus said] you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Jesus is dealing with an interesting puzzle here. He is speaking to a group of Jews who *had* believed in him – the current state of their faith remains in question. He tells these once-believers that *if* they remain in his Word, they are truly his disciples who will know the truth and that truth will set them free. But their response is the puzzling part. Essentially they say, “Set us free? What do you mean? Free from what? We aren’t slaves. Never have been.” Nevermind those 400 years the children of Abraham were slaves in Egypt. Nevermind their current status as conquered subjects of the Roman Empire.

But Jesus doesn’t choose to focus on those facts from their past or present. Instead he takes the idea of freedom and enslavement to a deeper level: “*Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*” So who is included here? Well, who sins? Everyone! So Jesus implies that all people are slaves in need of freedom, regardless of their ancestry or social status. Part of our sinful condition, though, is fooling ourselves into thinking we don’t need saving. But the book of James brings us this sobering reminder: “*If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” So Jesus’ audience had deceived themselves – they denied that they were slaves on every level – “Not a slave to Rome, not a slave to sin, never have been, and so I don’t need *you* to save me, Jesus!”

The real problem is not so much the slavery itself but the **denial** that we are slaves. We tend look at ourselves through rose-colored glasses. We think we aren’t as bad off as we actually are. Like addicts we’d prefer to think that we occasionally sin but we can stop whenever we want. I think of Scrooge from Dickinson’s [A Christmas Carol](#). He doesn’t see himself as a bad guy, just frugal. But Marley’s ghost appears to him dragging heavy chains, which he says are the chains he forged in life. He warns Scrooge that he is working on a chain right now that will follow him beyond the grave if he doesn’t change. That’s what sin is like. Its enslaving effect often remains invisible to us. But every sinful thought, word, or deed adds another link to our chain; makes it longer, heavier and ever more impossible to break free from. The first step toward obtaining freedom is to stop denying we are in slavery and acknowledge that things are worse than they appear, not better. We actually are in too deep and we are beyond the point of getting ourselves out.

This was the problem that Luther faced in the Medieval Catholic church. At the root of it all, there was a denial of the truth about human nature. The Church had drifted away from the Scriptures and taught that Adam and Eve’s sin, the fall of humanity, had only damaged human nature *not* destroyed it. Therefore, we needed Christ to get us part of the way to salvation. His death on the cross for us was kind of like the defibrillator jump-starting the heart...but then it was up to us to keep it going. “If you sin, well, you need to

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 make it up to God by doing acts of penance. And hey, you can do it! Because, after all, you're not a *slave* of sin. You're actually pretty strong and capable, so go ahead and earn back God's love!" The church invented all kinds of ways that people would supposedly be able to gain God's grace, up to and including *paying for* the forgiveness of your sins with money!

But the more ol' Marty studied the Scriptures in the original languages, the more he realized, "Hey this whole sin thing put us in a much worse place with God than we thought...nothing we do is quite going to cover it. We *are* slaves to sin and it's going to require something much more than money to set us free. But the good news is also better than we thought! We actually don't have to save ourselves. God himself has provided the price for our freedom. Jesus' dying and rising for us doesn't just cover part of it, it's the whole thing! And we don't have to earn that; we can't! God gives it to us as pure gift, received by faith alone, apart from works of the law!"

500 years later and we are just as easily deceived into denying only Jesus can set us free. We come up with our own version of the medieval pay-as-you-sin theology of glory. Jesus died for you but if you really want to be a Christian; if you really want to be saved; you've got to vote Republican (or Democrat), you've got to make it clear to everybody which sins you are against; you've got to attend every church event; you've got to be completely pure and show no sign of struggle or weakness. Fit the stereotype of the strong manly man or the soft-spoken girly woman. We add all these other requirements. Lutherans confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean but we still fool ourselves into thinking that we aren't really all that bad; that if just keep doing all these extra things, we can prove ourselves to God and get out of slavery. But the law written in Scripture and on our hearts tells us that isn't true. We can't free ourselves.

So what shall we do? Jesus said, "*You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*" If you trace the word "truth" throughout the Gospel of John, it's very interesting. You see, to Jesus, "Truth" is not just a concept. It's not just the opposite of falsehood or a set of facts that we have to accept. To Jesus, "truth" is embodied. In John chapter 1, we read, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and **truth**.*" So Jesus took on flesh and he embodied God's grace and truth to us. In other words, if we want to know the truth about God; if we want to look on him as he truly is and know how he truly feels about us, we look at Jesus. Later on, Jesus states this even more clearly. In chapter 14, he says, "*I am the way and the **truth** and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

But the story of the truth goes even farther in the Gospel. As we approach the end of the book, we find Jesus on trial and we have the famous conversation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. Jesus tells him, "*For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the **truth**. Everyone*

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*who is of the **truth** listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is **truth**?”* What is truth? It seems Pilate was a man ahead of his time because that is the question many are asking today. What is truth? Is there a such thing as one overarching truth or is there just “my truth” and “your truth?” And it’s interesting that Jesus does not respond to Pilate’s question...at least he doesn’t respond with words. But Jesus continues to embody the **truth**. In response, he goes the way of the cross.

What is truth? Jesus is truth! This is truth – *greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, [while we were yet slaves to sin,] Christ died for us.* No good work we perform; no amount of money we pay can buy our freedom. But the blood of Christ has done this. Truth died for us and then Truth rose from the grave. Truth conquers death. Truth breaks the bonds of sin. Truth overcomes the world. Christ alone is the truth that sets us free. AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.