

October 27, 2019

John 8:31-36

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

“The last two years, I’ve actually learned I am free in prison. By that I mean I have discovered Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and by his grace I’ve been saved through him.”ⁱ

These beautiful words are from an inmate at the Anamosa State Penitentiary in an interview with Pastor Jerry Collell, then ELCA pastor of the *FreeIndeed* Congregation inside the walls of the prison. These words get to the very essence of the freedom Jesus speaks about. Jesus is the light of the world. He is the bread of life. He is the one through which we receive “grace upon grace”ⁱⁱ as John the Baptist tells us. He is the water our souls desperately need. Remember these words he spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”ⁱⁱⁱ He is the one who states, “I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.”^{iv} Jesus is the one who just verses earlier casts no judgment upon the woman caught in adultery, unlike many around her, and saves her life.

This is the freedom Jesus speaks of. It is not freedom in a political sense the religious leaders think of in their response or as many of our minds gravitate toward upon hearing that word “free.” What Jesus gets at is that which makes us Free indeed, the Father’s love for the world offered through the gift of the Son.

I somehow doubt many of us utter those words spoken by that inmate on a routine basis. Perhaps, we did many years ago in a paper as we prepared to affirm our baptism (aka Confirmation). However, I wonder if this concept that we are made right in God’s eyes through the grace of Jesus, at times, we simply take for

granted. Perhaps, we would do well to we proclaim daily, “By his grace I’ve been saved.”

I still recall my first visit to worship with the men at Anamosa. In a place few would equate with freedom and life, I soon realized that was not the case. It didn’t take long to remind me the bread of life, the living water, the Word become flesh, and his promise of bringing “grace upon grace” and salvation to the world is not bound by thick-cut limestone walls, steel bars on windows, or fortified gates that keep these men confined. No, the grace and freedom Jesus offers knows no limits, boundaries, or borders.

These men have been transformed by his grace. They have been given new life. In fact, some even view their situation in terms of blessing by stating they may not have ever been opened to the good news of Jesus Christ had it not been for being incarcerated. Life in Christ does indeed exist within these walls.

It didn’t take long to encounter the freedom Jesus offered and spoke of earlier, “They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.” We often think of salvation as something in the future, but Jesus states “they have *already* passed from death into life.” Is this freedom something we incur now?

According to that statement, yes! And watching those men that day and on subsequent visits there is no doubt the freedom to which Jesus speaks is indeed here and now. He does not judge them for what they have done in the past. He loves them unconditionally. He forgives them freely. He welcomes them openly. He uses them to proclaim this message of salvation to all they encounter and that includes those of us visiting.

In fact, another inmate Pastor Collell interviewed experienced the condemnation Jesus specifically forbids from one religious group as he was told, “You’re in prison. You’re not saved.” Imagine being incarcerated, already confined to a small cell and the world beyond the walls of that prison, and then hearing these words. I can only fathom another set of walls suddenly entrapped him. He had been judged unjustly and viewed only by past actions and his current situation.

Thankfully, the Spirit brought to him the message of “grace upon grace” through the ministry of *FreeIndeed*, Pastor Collell, his fellow brothers in Christ within the prison, and the many visitors who surrounded him with the love of Christ embodied in the church.

Never did I envision personally finding so much life inside those walls. Through the music they sang, the testimonies they spoke, the hands raised in praise and thanksgiving, the joy in their voices, the prayers they offered, and at times even the tears at the Table or upon hearing those words of absolution, “In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.”

This freedom Jesus offers is transformational. Right now! I shared with the council earlier this month how I was forever changed through this “grace upon grace” Jesus gives. Seldom did I hear the good news of Jesus Christ growing up; until one day, upon visiting what would soon be our home congregation in Huxley, did I hear the gospel of grace. That freedom lifted the burden of years of guilt and shame from my weary shoulders. The spiritual stranglehold created by this web of lies was loosed and the God of love and life brought the soothing balm of salvation to me then and there and continues to do so each day.

Where have you witnessed the freedom Jesus offers? Where do you need the balm of salvation he offers? How has this “grace upon grace” changed your life? Take a minute and reflect on this the power of Jesus at work in your life, yesterday, today, and into the future. He is the wellspring of life-giving water rushing through our soul, he is the bread of life satisfying our every hunger, he is the one who doesn’t condemn but gives us the power and promise to pass from death into life. Amen.

ⁱ Unknown Inmate at Anamosa State Penitentiary being interviewed by Pastor Jerry Collell of *FreeIndeed* Congregation; www.seiasynod.org/ministries/prisonministry/

ⁱⁱ John 1:17

ⁱⁱⁱ John 4:13-14 (NRSV)

^{iv} John 5:24 (NET)