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Rick Myatt

WE NEED TO KNOW WHERE WE PARKED

John 8:31-47

Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette, was born to a noble family in France in the 18th century. His family had a long history of military service, which he intended to follow, so at the tender young age of 13 he received a commission as an officer in the army of France. A few years later he became convinced that the effort of the British colonies in America to assert and fight for independence from Britain was a noble cause. He believed in it so fervently that he traveled to America and offered to join in their fight. At the age of 19 he was commissioned into the Continental Army. He would eventually lead colonial troops in battle. When the war was over and the colonials had won their independence, he said, “Humanity has won its battle. Liberty now has a country.”

Lafayette saw the American Revolution as a struggle for the entire human race, and that the Americans’ victory was one that gave hope to the whole race. Now people would have a chance to see what a truly free nation looked like. That is a message that matters to us even today, for we value freedom greatly. Our national anthem speaks of our homeland being the “land of the free.” We most certainly are not the only ones who value freedom. Moshe Dayan, the famous Israel military and political leader, said, “Freedom is the oxygen of the soul.”

Patrick Henry, in his inspiring speech to the House of Burgesses in Virginia said, “Is life so dear and peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I care not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.” Wow. Better to die than not be free. Freedom is more important than life itself, he claimed. We were reminded of the value of freedom during the pandemic when our freedom was curtailed. Many people objected, sometimes strenuously, to the many restrictions that were put upon us. I have to tell you that Laurie and I rejoiced when I had my most recent infusion and we were told that wearing a face mask was optional. We had freedom, and we happily exercised it. What a relief it was not to have to wear that mask while getting treatment. Freedom is a beautiful thing. Today we are going to think about freedom. What is freedom? Freedom from what? Freedom to do what? Why does it matter? How do we get it? Jesus spoke of freedom in John 8:31-47, and today we are going to consider the implications of what he said. We are going to think about what it means to be truly free, to be free indeed.

We know that opposition to Jesus had already solidified prior to these events. The establishment leaders of Israel were trying to find a way to eliminate him. But when this discussion was done the leaders of Israel would be so angry and violently opposed to Jesus there would be no turning back. Jesus said some things in this conversation that sent them over the edge, if they had not been there already.

PREMISE: FREEDOM WAS THE TOPIC UNDER DISCUSSION

Verse 32 ends with Jesus’ statement, “the truth will set you free.” Then in verse 36 he said, “If the Son (meaning himself) sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Jesus promised freedom. That idea of freedom is central to the verses that follow.

JESUS CLAIMED TO GIVE FREEDOM

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” That is a given, right? Obviously, if people don’t buy what a teacher is saying there is no sense in which they are his disciples. A disciple, by definition, is one learning from a master or a teacher. If you are not following what the master teaches, you are not a disciple.

Recently we were baby sitting Toby and Anna’s kids one evening. Laurie was putting some dishes away in the kitchen and 7 year old Ella was helping her. Laurie said, “Do the plates go up here in this cabinet?” Ella responded, “Well obvi.” Laurie said, “Obvi? What does that mean?” Ella answered, “It means obviously.” It turns out Ella is 7 going on 16, apparently. When Jesus said if you hold to his teaching you are his disciple don’t you feel like saying, “Well obvi”? We understand that a real disciple follows the teaching of his or her master. Why did Jesus feel the need to say something that seems like a given?

I believe it is because there were in that day many people who liked a lot of things Jesus said and did. They loved it when he healed people. They were thrilled when he miraculously produced free food for a massive crowd of thousands of people. They applauded when he freed people from demonic possession. They were pleased when he said that not one letter of the Law of Moses would pass away without being fulfilled. But Jesus was also going to say a lot of things that were as unpalatable to many back then as cilantro is to me today. He would say that his kingdom was not of this world. They didn’t want to hear that. They wanted a mighty king who would drive out their hated Roman overlords. He would say things like “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Nobody thought being poor was being blessed. He said they should love their enemies, including the Romans, Samaritans and assorted Gentiles. He had said things like people had to believe in him to have eternal life. He called the most respected leaders in their country white washed tombs, full of death on the inside. Jesus was telling them they were going to have to accept the hard to understand things he said as well as the things they liked. They were going to have to let him blow up their cherished pre-conceived ideas and not try to pour new wine into old wineskins.

The same is true today. There are many people who want to pick and choose what they’re going to believe and obey from Jesus. They like it when Jesus said we must not judge others and we must love all people, even our enemies. But then he said that the gate to his kingdom and eternal life is narrow. In other words, more will be excluded from his kingdom than will enter it, and people in our culture don’t like that. They want it to be wide open. He had some things to say about sexuality that they don’t like, so they’d like to just redact those comments. But Jesus made it very clear. If you’re going to be his disciple, you’re going to have to believe what he said and do what he taught we should do. Well obvi. One would think so, but some people struggle with swallowing what for them is theological cilantro. They want to identify as a disciple of Jesus without living by what he said. He said that is not an option on the menu.

Laurie and I have friends who insist they are Christians. They would be offended if you suggested they were not disciples of Jesus, but they do not follow his teaching. They blithely ignore or reject parts of it they find unappealing. The late Christopher Hitchens was one of the world’s most notable atheists. He was once interviewed by a Unitarian minister named Marilyn Sewell. She began the interview by saying she didn’t take the Bible literally, didn’t believe in atonement through Jesus Christ. She asked if he made any distinction between what she called fundamentalists and more liberal Christians like herself. He answered, “I would say that if you don’t believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, if you don’t believe that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you’re not really in any meaningful sense a Christian.” Yeah, that’s pretty much what Jesus said.

Jesus also said there is a profound effect of being his disciples. He said if they would listen to his teaching and follow him, they would know the truth, and knowing the truth would set them free. He was telling them that his teaching was the truth that people need to be free. His truth is the certain path to the real freedom we all need and want.

That is a controversial thing to say in our culture. Oprah Winfrey says that each of us needs to live according to our own truth. Truth is not one thing. It is whatever we decide it is for us, this amorphous, malleable thing, because one size doesn’t fit all. That is the spirit of our age. There is no one truth. Each of us has our own personal truth, which means what Jesus said cannot be true. But you can’t take the approach of Oprah and our culture and be a disciple of Jesus. You can only take that position by rejecting what Jesus claimed. We’re going to come back and spend some time considering that claim, but for right now, I just want you to see the claim that Jesus made. He said he had The Truth, that if you listen to and obey him you will know not some truth, a truth, but The Truth, and knowing that truth would produce true freedom for anyone who had it no matter what else might happen in their lives.

JESUS’ OPPONENTS SAID THEY WERE ALREADY FREE

The religious leaders answered Jesus in verse 33, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” That seems an absurd thing to say. They weren’t truly free. They had been conquered and ruled by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks and now the Romans. They hadn’t been free for 600 years, longer by far than our “land of the free” has even existed. The Romans controlled what happened in their society. They forced them to pay taxes, often onerous ones, to Rome. They controlled who their political rulers were and even who would be designated the high priest. They set limits on how they practiced their religion. The Romans were a hated, oppressive presence ruling in their land.

In their minds they were free because they could worship God mostly as they saw fit. They put a great deal of stock in the fact that they were Abraham’s descendants. They believed that being descended from Abraham made them free in a spiritual sense regardless of their political or social condition. A leading first century Jewish scholar, Rabbi Akiva, said they were, “sons of the kingdom despite their conquests.” Even being ruled by Rome, they were free because they knew and worshiped the true God. They were his people.

Jesus argued that they were not truly Abraham’s children. In verses 39-41 he said, “If you were Abraham’s children then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the work of your own father.” They objected that God was their father. He countered if God were their father they would love him. Then he administered the coup de grace. He said in verse 44, “You belong to your father, the devil, and want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language.”

Well, that went over real well. Calling them the spawn of Satan meant there would be no turning back. Jesus had just thrown gasoline on the fire of their hostility to him. At the end of this chapter he’s going to say something that will finish it off for good. However, in verse 34 Jesus made a statement that is key in his discussion of real freedom. He said, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” Well that sounds kind of like an old time religion statement, one that people today don’t relate to. The idea of sin is unpopular today. A sin is something wrong. But if there is no one truth, there is no absolute right and no wrong, then there is no sin either. Is this just an irrelevant anachronism from a less enlightened age?

This is not a statement we should quickly dismiss. According to Jesus there is something that can enslave us. He claimed it was a threat to every human being because everyone sins. No one wants to lose freedom. No one wants to be a slave. To be a slave to something means it owns us and we can’t do anything about it. None of us likes to be in that situation where something controls us. Something in us rebels against control like that. I’ll give you a mundane, trivial example. Our kids have young children under the age of 5. One thing they treasure is a precious resource. It is a solid night of uninterrupted sleep. All too often for one reason or another their sleep is interrupted by one of their kids waking up. One of the benefits of growing older would seem to be that your sleep isn’t interrupted by kids waking you up. But now I find that a night of uninterrupted sleep is rare for me. My body can’t seem to go an entire night without needing to use the bathroom facilities. It wasn’t too bad when that meant waking up once a night due to that insistent call. But lately it has been 2 or even 3 times it happens. It irks me that I can’t fix that problem. I don’t have control over it. It owns me. I cannot choose to do what I want to do, and this is really irksome. I want to be able to choose to sleep through the night, but I don’t have that ability. I don’t like something controlling me like that.

But as annoying as that is, it’s kind of a fact of life. What’s really annoying is when people assert what feels like intrusive control over my life. I have 3 words for you. Home Owners Association. We have not had much to complain about recently, but there have been times when they have been what feels like an oppressive, sometimes arbitrary presence. It has grated on me.

Jesus was warning that there is something that can control us and that we won’t have the option of gaining mastery over it. He called it sin. What did he mean by that, and how does it control us and enslave us? We can get a good idea of what he was talking about by considering the people who were opposing him.

Most of us would not think, if we encountered one of the religious leaders of Israel, especially the Pharisees, that they were slaves to sin. They were some of the most religious people who have ever lived. Their ability to live by the rules was impressive. They looked like the farthest thing from being enslaved by sin. They were so good at being disciplined and doing all the right things that most people, while admiring them, admitted they could never be like them.

Yes, they were very religious. They were aces at keeping laws. But they were determined to kill Jesus. What had Jesus done to deserve such hostility? He had done nothing wrong. Yes, he had violated some of their interpretations of the laws and extensions of them, but he had actually lived by the real meaning of the laws. He had done so perfectly. He had done what no other human being has ever done, living in perfect accord with God’s will. He was completely innocent of wrong or evil. He pointed out they they couldn’t find any sin in him. It was true, yet they wanted to kill him. What is astounding is they couldn’t see the conflict between what they claimed to believe and what they were actually doing.

They perceived Jesus to be a threat to their position, to their authority and their power, to the respect they were given by other people. That threat could not be allowed. It had to be removed. The scary thing is, they couldn’t see what was wrong with that.

At its core, sin is self centeredness. And the problem is, we are all owned by it. And we mostly can’t even see it. We are enslaved by it. The late writer, David Foster Wallace, said, “Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it’s so socially repulsive, but it’s pretty much the same for all of us, deep down. It is our default setting, hard wired into our boards at birth. Think about it. There is no experience you’ve had that you were not at the absolute center of.”

He’s right. But what’s so bad about that? Sin, by definition, is evil. Evil, by definition, always destroys and harms. Here’s the truth about the self centeredness that Wallace so clearly described. It is at the root of every problem the human race has. Every bit of suffering humans inflict on each other grows out of that self centeredness. And we can’t stop ourselves. It’s there in all of us. It controls us. It literally enslaves us. And even more insidious, it blinds us to its existence. We can’t see it very well in ourselves even as it is dominating us.

A few years ago the *New Yorker* magazine had an article about the African nation Mauritania. It was the last nation in the world to outlaw slavery in 1981. The article said that to this day the situation of slavery in the country is the worst in the world. One former slave is quoted in the article saying, “To the slave, his identity is his master.”

That last statement is powerful. It is not uncommon for people to be enslaved by something, something the Bible calls sin, and for that thing to be their identity. For the Pharisees, it was spiritual pride and position. It enslaved them and became their identity. I know people today who have staked their identity in something that Jesus would call sin, and that thing owns them. Sadly, they can’t see it, and it slowly destroys them.

One of the things I have always found delightful about Laurie is her security in who she is. It sets her free to laugh at herself, to be genuine and to be kind of uninhibited. Think of that term. Uninhibited means not inhibited. That means free. When she was 18 she had a front tooth knocked out in an accident. The dentist put in a crown over the root, but eventually that root died and she had to get an implant. That process took the better part of a year, and during that time she had what they called a flipper, which was kind of a bridge with a fake tooth. She could take it out to eat. I remember one time while she was talking about being like some of the folks we saw in Mississippi who were missing teeth, she popped that thing out and flashed a big smile showing that big gap in the middle of her mouth. But I also remember being in a restaurant with her and it wasn’t so fun. She had to take that thing out to eat, and it made her feel self conscious. We all know what that’s like. You think people are looking at you and thinking how weird you look, noticing mostly your obvious problem.

Does that feel free? Far from it. It feels like the opposite. It is unpleasant and uncomfortable. You fear what people are thinking about you. Think about that term. Self conscious. You are thinking about yourself, and when you do that, you are not experiencing freedom. Our self obsession destroys freedom! That self focus is sin. It masters us, enslaves us, produces fear and anxiety, and robs us of true freedom.

Jesus said this slavery controls all of us in some way, and it destroys us. It robs us of true life. It brings fear, guilt, anxiety, anger, conflict, ruined relationships, hopelessness to us and erodes our souls. It is a terrible slave master. But Jesus also said freedom is possible. That freedom comes from the truth, the truth that is in him.

IMPLICATIONS

THERE IS TRUTH

Barna research group has done several surveys that reveal that the majority of Americans believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth. They believe that all “truth” is subjective. Richard Rorty, a postmodern philosopher and professor at several prestigious universities, wrote a book titled *Achieving Our Country*. In it he said that we must “abandon the idea that one can say how things really are.” He said that the great promise of America is “our refusal to believe in the existence of Truth.” If there is no truth, then Jesus was wrong. We can’t know the truth, because there is no such thing, and so that “truth” can’t free us.

We can understand why someone might say something like that. Think of the horrors that have been perpetrated by Islamic Jihadists, by the Taliban and ISIS. They believe they have an absolute lock on the truth, and those who disagree with them are promoting destructive lies. Throughout history people certain they know the truth have caused untold havoc.

But we need to stop and think about whether that claim that all things are relative and subjective makes sense. Philosopher Frithjof Schuon said there is a big problem with this insistence on things only being relative. He said relativism fundamentally “consists in propounding the claim that there is no truth as if this were truth or in declaring that it is absolutely true that there is nothing but the relatively true…the assertion nullifies itself if it is true.” If the statement that there is no one truth is true, then it is itself also not true.

There’s the obvious logical inconsistency of the statement that there is no absolute truth. But there are other big problems as well. Dr. Stephen Anderson is a professor in Canada. He decided he needed an attention getter to, in his words, shock his students into taking an ethical stand. He displayed without comment a photo of Bibi Aisha, an Afghan teen who was forced into an abusive marriage with a Taliban fighter. When she tried to run away her family caught her, cut off her nose and ears and left her for dead. She was saved by a nearby American hospital. The picture of her is horrific. He said some of the students couldn’t even bear to look at it. He said they seemed confused, unsure what to think. Finally they said things like, “Well, we might not like it, but maybe over there it’s okay,” or “It’s just wrong to judge other cultures.”

Faced with unspeakable evil, they stood mute, because if there is no absolute truth, then there is no absolute right or wrong. If there is no truth then torture, slavery, sexual abuse, rape, racism, lying, cheating, Ponzi schemes are not wrong, they are merely things that the majority of people in our country at the current time don’t like. There is no basis for saying anything is wrong no matter how bad it is.

A friend once told me about a kooky friend of hers. This friend had gone to the mall to do some shopping. When she was done she went out in the parking lot and could not find her car. She happened to call my friend, who told me the story, and explained her frustration. My friend said, “Don’t you remember where you parked?” The woman answered, “Of course I remember. I parked next to a green truck.” Right there you have the problem of relativism. There is no constant landmark to orient yourself and tell you whether you are in the right place or not.

No one believes that is really true. No one lives like that. We know some things are true and some are not. Some things are just wrong. Laurie and I were taking care of our grandsons, Hunter and Wesley. Wesley, now 3, is bigger and more capable than 1 year old Hunter. He mostly is very good to his little brother. But he is also extremely territorial when it comes to some of his toy cars and trucks. Hunter picked up one to play with and Wesley just grabbed it from him. His bigger so he can just yank it away. We both immediately said, “No Wesley, that’s not right.” Would you like to live in a society where there is no right or wrong, so the strongest can just do whatever they want and take whatever they want? That’s the law of the jungle, and it ends up being horrifying. But if there is no absolute truth, that is where you will end up inevitably.

After the many natural disasters that have befallen our state recently the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article about those disasters that had the caption, “We may well live in a post truth era, but nature does not.” In the Declaration of Independence our nations founding fathers wrote, “We hold these truths to be self evident.” Wait, if all is relative, there are no self evident truths. But those truths they alluded to included the inalienable rights of every person. Without the truths, there are no inalienable rights. The entire foundation of our nation eventually will crumble without those self evident truths.

There is one last crucial reality about truth. Jesus claimed truth exists and it can be known. It can be known by following his teaching, by knowing him. When a person claims there is no absolute truth he must say that he is right and Jesus is wrong. If Jesus was who he claimed to be and proved himself to be, then we can know that truth exists because he said so.

WE CAN BE FREE

Jesus said that knowing the truth will set us free, truly free. This won’t be the kind of pseudo freedom the religious leaders of his day claimed to have. It will be the genuine article. We will be truly free. But what is this freedom? We will be free from what, free to do what?

It is not autonomy, which many in our society want. Autonomy means “self law,” the only law I have to obey is whatever I want to do. True human autonomy does not exist, for we have constraints on us. I can’t just decide I’m going to fly. You will occasionally hear someone say, “This is a free country. I can do whatever I want.” No, you can’t. What if you want to take money that is not yours from a bank? What if you want to drive 100 miles per hour on the freeway? What if you want to be king of America and force everybody to do whatever you want them to do? You can’t do that. I want to make the Padres play better and be like the awesome team everyone expected them to be, but I can’t do that. You can’t do whatever you want in life.

We need to think about what it is that people really want when they say they want to be free to be or do whatever they choose. Whatever that thing is, it is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. Imagine someone who says, for instance, that they cannot imagine being married to just one person because they want to be free to experience romance and relations with many people. They don’t want to have their freedom limited. What does that person want? They are looking for something. They are looking to be happy, to be fulfilled, to have life be as full as it can possibly be. Their supposed freedom is merely the means they think will enable them to achieve that end. So what is that end? That is true freedom, finding that end.

The writers of the Declaration of Independence said that all people should have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The freedom we need most is to be free to experience true fullness of life, to make the most of life, to be at peace, to be joyful, to be fully alive, to have hope in everything.

The late pastor and writer, Ray Stedman, said freedom is, “Being able to be all that you were meant to be…to feel fulfilled, to be all that is possible for you to do and be.” I would put it this way. Freedom is being free to live the fullest, most fulfilling, most truly human life possible. It is being able to do that whether you are rich or poor, sick or health, powerful or weak, young or old, riding the top of the wave or going through the deepest of valleys.

Why did God create human beings? Ultimately we know it was for his glory. But we need to recall John’s statement in 1 John 4:8 that God is love. In his essence, God is love, meaning everything he does is motivated by love. That being true we know that God created humans because of love. Love is behind everything he does with us.

Given that God loves us, and loves us perfectly and without end, what do you suppose he wants for us to experience? He created us to experience life that is full, joyful, completely at peace, the best possible life we could ever imagine. Everything humans do is aimed at gaining that life, even though we’re not always aware that’s what we are pursuing.

When Jesus said that by holding to his teaching and knowing the truth, the truth will set us free, this is what he meant. We will be free to find and experience life as God always intended it to be, life we long for it to be. We will be free of the fear of condemnation, of falling short, of being inadequate and not measuring up. Free of the fear of being worthless. We will be free of guilt and of fear of rejection by God. We will be free of loneliness, of meaninglessness and hopelessness. We will even begin to experience freedom from slavery to our self centeredness, which is what destroys the life we long for. Being freed of that self consciousness enables us instead to love and serve other people, which is when life truly becomes full. As we live knowing God, living for his glory, that slavery to self begins to fade, and that will end up producing great joy, and the sense of freedom we long for.

The big question is, how to we experience this freedom more?

We hold to Jesus’ teaching. That means we should:

*Be poor in Spirit*

That means acknowledge our need of God’s grace. Humble ourselves before him, admit the truth and depend on what Jesus has done for us to make us acceptable before God. Trust in his grace to be sufficient.

*Believe in Jesus*

That means live by faith in him. Believe that what he supplies each day of our lives is enough. Believe that in living as he tells us we will find the life we are looking for. The path to true peace, true love, true joy, is found in believing he tells us the truth and obeying him.

*Live for his kingdom*

Every day of our lives in many ways we are faced continually with the choice between living for the Kingdom of Christ, and living for our kingdom. A kingdom is where a king rules. Who will rule in my life, is it me, or is it Jesus? Do I live for his will, his desires, his glory, or do I live for my will, my desires, my glory?

For me, I face that every time I speak on Sunday. I can make that about me and my kingdom, and if I do it produces, stress, anxiety, self consciousness. If I live for God’s kingdom it produces freedom and joy.

This afternoon Laurie and I are leaving for a trip that will involve flying on an airliner. I predict something will go wrong. There will be some hiccup. If I live for my kingdom there will be stress, frustration and concern. If I live for Christ’s kingdom there will be freedom to honor him whatever goes on. There will be peace because he rules.

To choose my kingdom is to choose slavery and lose life and freedom. To choose his kingdom is to become free and find life as God intended.