

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

I met Margaret a little over a year ago while I was serving as a hospital chaplain intern at Hershey Medical Center. Margaret had recently been moved from the Intensive Care Unit to Intermediate Care as she was recovering from complications from a recent heart transplant. She had been very sick, near the point of death, but was now making positive steps in her recovery. Margaret and I visited for a long time. She talked about her life ... about her family ... about her struggle following her heart transplant surgery ... about her struggles with her faith.

It was during our conversation that I realized that most of her struggle stemmed from her feeling of complete loss of independence. Instead of being made independent by her heart transplant, she was now faced with life-long dependence on anti-rejection medications that put a strain on her financial resources and dependence on others for assistance with daily activities. Margaret, it seemed, had become a slave.

Being enslaved means being completely dominated by something outside of ourselves, outside of our control. In our American society, we may find it hard to picture ourselves as slaves. After all, this is the land of the free and the home of the brave. We may be like the Jews in the gospel lesson – we've never been a slave to anyone. How can we be made free?

These Jews had been believing in Jesus, and now Jesus' words challenge their feeling of independence, of being in control of their lives both in this world and in the eternal world. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." They seem shocked. "We are descendents of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone." Wait a minute. What about their bondage in Egypt from which God had freed them? What about their current oppression by the Roman Empire?

Then Jesus gives them some clarification that hits close to the heart because it deals not with political or social realities, but the reality of the human condition. "Everyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin."

How many times have we taken our understanding of freedom – that we are able to make our own decisions, able to control our own destinies, able to do what we want – and applied it to whatever enslaves us, believing that through our own actions, we can free ourselves from that which dominates us? If we are enslaved by addiction, we are told by others, or may even say to ourselves, to simply pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and stop that addictive behavior. If we are enslaved by our focus on hoarding money, we simply give our money away. If we want to be in God's good graces, we simply promise to stop sinning and be better people.

But really, does our action to free ourselves from that which enslaves us lead to true freedom?

How many of us, in an effort to free ourselves from our sin, find ourselves saying “I’ll never do that again!” Yes. In our guilt and anguish we might find ourselves saying “Never again” but before we know it, there we are, right in the middle of our sin once more.

No matter how hard we try, no matter how many promises we make to ourselves or to God, that we will not be sinful, we are doomed to failure. Jesus understood our captivity to sin when he says “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” Jesus understood that as a broken humanity, we are incapable of living a sin-free life. We may try. We may vow that never again will we sin, but while the words are still hanging in the air, we turn away from God and continue in our sinning. And after doing that again, and again, and again, we still somehow think that we can be responsible for changing our situation.

But you know, being put into a right relationship with God isn’t about what we do. Being brought back into a right relationship with God is about what God has already done. In the earliest times, God brought the chosen people back into a right relationship through the law – a set of rules to follow to be God’s people. That’s what we said we needed. Just give us the rules and we’ll follow them. But we didn’t.

We didn’t keep our end of the bargain, but God did. You would think that God would have given up on us ... but God didn’t. We are loved by a God who keeps promises. We are loved by a God who promises “I will be their God and they will be my people. I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

We are loved by a God that broke into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to bring us back into that right relationship. And in spite of our sinfulness, in spite of our unworthiness, we are made truly free from our enslavement to sin and death, through the saving actions of Jesus Christ. Through his death and resurrection ... Jesus ... makes us free from our bondage to sin.

It’s not about what we do. It’s about what God has already done.

That was the driving belief behind Martin Luther’s 95 Theses against the issuance of indulgences which sparked what we remember today as the beginning of the Reformation. Luther feared that the reliance on indulgences, feared that the focus on our works in ensuring our own salvation, would take the place of our reliance on the saving actions of Jesus Christ.

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Before I left Margaret’s room that day, I asked her if we could pray together. Her response: “You go ahead and do all the praying that you want to. I learned long ago that I am the only one that can take care of me. Everything is up to me.”

I did say a prayer that day, although I was tempted not to, and as I ended our visit, with a tear rolling down her cheek, she looked up at me, and simply said “Thank you.” When I discussed the visit with my supervisor, he looked at me and said, “What you just experienced was God’s free gift of grace. You see, in past chaplain visits, Margaret refused to let anyone pray.”

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Amen.