

Anyone who says the Bible doesn't have a biting sense of humor has never read our gospel passage for today. The Jews listening to Jesus say to him, "We are descendant of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Our gospel writer wants us to think, "Are they really that thick!?! Not slaves to anyone!?!". As Children of Abraham they have been enslaved by every major power that ever ruled the Middle East. The Egyptian Empire, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, the Greek Empire and its offshoots all enslaved them in one form or another. They've barely ever been free!

And then there is the total blindness to the fact that they are currently ruled by the iron fist of the Roman Empire, but they don't seem to notice. How blind could they be!?!

This biting judgment against their blindness makes us mock them, but as is often the case with the Gospel of John, if you are laughing at the foolishness of one of the people in the story you'd better take a close look at yourself too.

Here on Reformation Sunday we do well to look at our own lives and see what enslaves us. We could say, "We are Americans. We've never been enslaved by anyone." And, technically we'd be right; unlike the Jews. But we'd be blind to our own reality.

I think a lot of people live their lives by rules, norms and expectations they've never really critically engaged. They do what everyone else around them is doing just because everyone else around them is doing it!

My junior year of college I was living in a dormitory and a freshmen was in the next room. He grew up a good Jewish boy living by all the rules and expectations of his parents. He then discovered the freedom of college. I don't really know what all he got into as he explored his independence and his self-identity but his hair style became an interesting thing to watch. My roommate and I had a lot of fun rolling our eyes behind his back. First it was its natural color - black - and straight. Over weeks he combed it in many different ways. Then he got it cut shorter. Then it was shorter again. Soon he was

down to a short buzz cut. Then it was various designs shaved into the top and sides; then different colors. Ultimately he had his head shaved completely. It was so obvious he was struggling to figure out who he was. But instead of actually being himself and sticking to it, he was trying to mimic other people he saw as desirable. I always wondered what his parents thought when he went home for holidays. They never knew what their child would look or be like each time they saw him.

Have you ever really sat down and critically considered what your model of success is? Most of us want to be successful. We work hard at it. And while I'm sure our definition for success varies for each of us I think there are a few points that will be in common. One of the key ones is that we want to be acceptable in the eyes of our friends and neighbors. We don't want to be considered freaks or weirdos. And that puts a tremendous social pressure on us.

I've mentioned before that I more heavily limit my children's extra-curricular activities than many parents do. It's not uncommon to feel pressure from other parents that somehow my children will come out lacking because of it. I

personally think they are busy enough with school work, scouting, and a seasonal sport. I want them to have time to actually be kids too.

In response to their pressure it is very easy for me to put myself in an ivory tower and say, "No, I've got my priorities straight. I'm not going to bow to this peer pressure." I can also very easily say from my self-created lofty heights, "Have you ever really looked at why you're doing to your kids what you're doing? Aren't you really just uncritically going with the flow? Aren't you just letting your life and your children's lives be defined by cultural trends?"

Yes, those are easy criticisms for me to make in my self-righteous thinking. But in this case my thoughts are missing one key element - the power of community.

Last week the Victor Ministerium met here for their monthly meeting. All the pastors were lamenting the complex lives our parishioners lead and the way our churches have to compete with many other things for people's attention - particularly teenagers and their parents. The Rev. Jon Walker, pastor at

Willowbrook, had a very insightful comment though, which was also very challenging. He said look at the sports teams and the bands and the drama clubs. Aren't they just like churches? They have members, rules, and elders. They have a common purpose and they are all expected to work for it. They demand commitment from their members to the exclusion of other things. And they spend a lot of time together towards their goals. In other words, they build community - which is the same thing we are doing. Parents aren't pushing their kids to do this stuff so that they can become professional athletes or win big scholarships to college. They know that only a few will actually get that. What they want is for their kids to not miss out on community. They may be exhausted and totally burnt out. But they are exhausted and burnt out with other people too.

I find this idea of community is the most insightful response I've ever heard as to why parents keep their kids so busy. It's something I think is worth critically considering. If anything has gone wrong, we as the church are failing to deliver that sense of community to our people.

Here on Reformation Sunday we take a critical look at the church. We remember times past when the church has gone astray, and if we are honest with ourselves the church has gone quite astray these days too. Many will say we've lost our core values. Many will say that we fail to stand up for biblical truths or God's will. But I think the truth is that we've failed to give people authentic community; authentic community around God their creator and savior.

God has woven a deep truth into your heart and soul. It is the desire to be in community with others. It is the desire to understand others and to be understood by them. It is the desire to have common experiences: joys and struggles. It is the desire to have a common purpose.

What are many people enslaved to? Shallow temporary forms of community that don't really nourish them. Our job as Christians is two-fold. The easy part is inviting them to find community in the Church; the community of faith.

The hard part is reforming this community of faith into something that is truly a community. I don't mean a social

club. And I don't mean a once a week gathering for religious ritual and snacks afterward - in the case of today, a piece of pie. I mean a community strong enough and nourishing enough that it truly feeds our God-given need for community. Something that in our world of many options for community we can say, "I choose church because it has the true nourishment I need."

We will flourish and the gospel will come to life. As Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Amen