

I believe we are supposed to laugh derisively when we hear the Jews in our gospel reading say, "We are children of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone." How blind could they be? As "Children of Abraham" they've been enslaved by just about every major power that ever existed in the Middle East. In fact the only times the Jews have been free is when there is a power vacuum and there's been nobody there to conquer them. Plus, they've just been suffering from over a century of enslavement by the Romans! Really, how blind to history and your own reality could you really be?

And yet while the gospel writer John wants us to laugh at their ignorance it is also a challenge and perhaps a sting to us. As Americans we could say, "Our country is built on freedom. We have never been slaves to anyone!" Yet I propose that we could be completely wrong. We might be just as blind to our enslavement as the Jews were to theirs.

But what is enslaving us we ask? There are no oppressive powers that rule us. No one tells us what job we must have or

that we must join the military or what education we have. We have free speech, the right to keep and bear arms, and freedom of religion. But have you ever critically examined why you do what you do? Have you ever sat down and thought about the forces which really govern your life.

I believe the vast majority of what we do and what we decide is based upon meeting expectations others have imposed upon us. Some of those expectations are good and reasonable. Everyone is supposed to drive down the right side of the road. If you drive down the left side you're going to create more than just a minor problem! But expectations are everywhere.

Many parents are driven to rear well rounded children. You want your kids to get a good education. The strongest selling point for living in Victor and Farmington is the schools. You want them to experience sports and activities, arts and music. You want them to succeed in life so you push them academically and make sure they don't miss any opportunities. For some people in this area religion is also seen as part of a well rounded life. And so parents make sure there is some measure of church or religious experience for their children as well.

The question is, whose idea was it that you need to have well rounded kids? Whose idea of success are children being reared to fulfill? Few people really sit down and ask themselves if the typical societal expectations of children are healthy or realistic. Here's my opinion. Our societal expectations raise over-scheduled, over-stressed obese children with no real moral foundation, no solid live-by-the-labor-of-your-hands survival experience, and no workable relationship with God. Yet few question it. But I'm not just going to pick on society either.

I think we need to also consider how enslaving the church can be too - or at least many people's unquestioned assumptions about the church and Christian life. We remain enslaved to our expectations of how a good Christian lives. A good Christian goes to worship every Sunday. A good Christian is always courteous and kind. A good Christian never swears or drinks too much. A good Christian reads her Bible every day and listens to Christian music and goes to Christian movies. A good Christian has a loving marriage and happy children who don't do drugs or get into trouble with the law. A good Christian..., well, you fill in the blank. What ways do we trap ourselves, place

expectations on ourselves or find ourselves bound by “shoulds” that we have no idea where they came from?

Here are some questions to consider. Where in the Bible does it say Christians should worship on Sunday? It doesn't. Where in the Bible does it say when, where, how, or how often a Christian should worship? It doesn't. Where in the Bible does it say how a church should be operated. It doesn't. Where does it say how worship should go? Here there are a few traces. 1 Corinthians 8 and 14 we learn that worship should be done in an orderly fashion and not complete chaos, that people shouldn't get drunk during Communion and that worship should be done with outsiders in mind so they aren't too confused. That's it. Where does the Bible describe the role of pastors? It doesn't.

How many times does Jesus talk about the Church in the Bible? Twice, both times in Mathew. And how many times is Jesus actually recorded as saying the word “church”? Five times. If I go by the biblical record I've talked about the church more in this sermon than Jesus ever did.

Now I don't intend to trash any of what we do, but I do want us to recognize a few things. Just about everything, *everything*, we do as a church is a human tradition invented by our ancestors to serve their spiritual needs. There's nothing wrong with that; except when those traditions fail to serve God in this day and age, and especially when they get in the way of serving God today.

That was Martin Luther's main complaint at the beginning of the Reformation. No one was questioning why they were doing what they were doing. They were enslaved and didn't know why. And we too can be enslaved to things we think we know, but don't know at all.

Jesus left the construction of the community of faith called the church up to his disciples completely. He left no formula, no organizational structure, no hierarchy. You as a Christian have freedom beyond your imagination. It is God's gift to you. Don't sacrifice it!

Perhaps the most powerful enslavement that comes upon us is the idea that life is about what we do. That is wrong. It is

enslavement. Life is *not* about what you do. Life is about what God has done *for* you.

We are starting our Make it Simple stewardship drive today. It's title alone says a lot. In the bulletin insert you received you'll find these words,

We often find ourselves over-scheduled, over-extended, and over-drawn. Our lives are cluttered with too many commitments, too many possessions. We can be consumed by it all—we wonder "Will I have enough?" We fear not wearing the right clothes, not driving the right car, not having the latest electronic toy, not living in the right house. Too often our things define who we are.

Jesus comes to us in the midst of our fears and announces—"Do not worry! God has provided for all of your needs!"

Talk about enslavement, and also freedom from slavery. You are saved by God's grace through the faith of Christ. It is not your own doing. It is God's doing. So that means you are free - completely and totally free.

Live that freedom. Don't be bound by the complexities of life. They only enslave you. Make it simple because faith is simple and therefore life is simple. We are free because Jesus has made it so. Amen