

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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October 31, 2021

John 8:31-36

When you go to seminary, in addition to three years or its equivalent of schooling, you also have to do a year of on-the-job training in an actual congregation. This is called internship. But before you can do your year of internship, you have to do ten additional weeks of on-the-job training as a chaplain at a hospital or nursing home, so that you have some experience in helping people to deal with difficult situations.

I did my ten weeks of on-the-job training at a prison on the base of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. I found out some things about myself there, and some things about prison. For example, people in a prison are not that different from people outside prison. Only, the lines are a lot starker, the colors of emotion and thought are a lot harsher.

In a prison, there are people who care only about themselves and their own gang, their own group of people. They don't care about anybody else. Outside a prison, there are people who care only about themselves and their own gang, their own group of people, and not anybody else.

In a prison, there are people who hate themselves, loath themselves. They feel they have wasted their lives, hurt other people, and so they may run away from themselves into drugs or alcohol or other addictions. They may try to prop up their sense of dignity with things that are usually good, but become idols when we use them to bolster our self-esteem, things like wealth or power or position in whatever group we are a part of. Outside prison, there are also people who loath themselves, who run away into addictions, who seek self-worth from wealth and position and power, rather from God.

In prison, there are some people who, after talking with them for a while, you say to yourself, “I’m sorry, but I think it might be better for everyone if this person is in prison.” Outside of prison, there are some people who, after talking with them for a while, we may say, “I’m sorry, but I think it might be better for everyone if this person is in prison.”

In prison, there are many people who are just trying to survive the best way they know how. Same on the outside.

In prison there are people who are trying to repent, to turn their lives around in spite of the crazy world in which they live. Outside of prison, there are us, who are trying to repent, to turn our lives toward God’s life every day, as our Baptism calls us to.

I had a supervisor at the prison. His name was Vern Flesner. Vern helped us to learn and to not mess up too badly. He put each of us in our own office adjacent to the chapel, and we had office hours.

One day during office hours, a guy walks into my office. He’s chunky, not really big but he had some weight on him. He was white, with bushy brown beard, brown hair and eyes. His hands were splayed, fingers stretching in all directions, and waving in the air—all except the thumb and forefinger on his right hand. These held a pair of coke-bottle-thick glasses with black plastic rims. I looked into his eyes. They weren’t focused.

“Could I be the third Elijah?” he asked. “I think I might be the third Elijah, who is supposed to come before the end of the world. I think maybe, I am.”

I’m sitting there thinking, “Third Elijah, third Elijah, Don’t know of any third Elijah in the Bible. There’s the first Elijah, prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures. Then Jesus talks about John the Baptist like he is a second Elijah. But I’ve never heard of a third Elijah.” So my immediate reaction was to say, “No! You’re not the third Elijah, there’s no such person. Calm down.”

But he says, “The other guy in the other room, he says I’m not the third Elijah, but I think I am.”

So right away I’m thinking, “Okay, a straight up “No” didn’t work. What else?”

One of the things they teach you in this on-the-job training is that, when a situation gets stressful, take a deep breath. Easier said than done. Take a deep breath and try to use your best thinking to find the most reasonable, sensible best next step forward. So I thought to myself, “Maybe if I step into his world a little bit.” So I said,

“Well, if you are the third Elijah, and I’m not saying that you’re not, but if you are, then God will let you know when it’s time. God let the first two Elijahs know. God will let you know too.”

“And if you’re not the third Elijah, then you don’t have to worry about it.”

The guy calms down, sits down in the chair beside mine, puts his head in one hand, and says, “Then what makes me special?”

I said, “The love of God makes you special. Jesus brings the love of God to you right now, before you do anything, before you say anything, before you are anything. That’s what makes you special.”

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus says, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Usually, we think of truth as an item of information that we agree with, like, “The earth orbits around the sun.” But that’s not what truth is in the Gospel of John. In John, the truth is a person, Jesus. “I am the way, the truth and the life,” says Jesus.

So, the relationship of trust with Jesus sets us free.

Also, usually, we think of freedom as the ability to do whatever we want. “I’m free. I can do whatever I want,” we say. But that is not freedom. That’s just bondage to ourselves—our whims, our desires, our fears, our opinions, our resentments, our limited knowledge, us. The love of God, that’s freedom, because the love of God is about so much more than just us. When we are swept up into the love of God, we become a part of God touching not just us, but every human being on the planet, all languages, all fascinating ways of looking at the world. We become a part of God’s connection with every life form in all its wonder and glory. We stretch our hands with God’s love to the edges of the universe. That’s freedom.

That freedom comes to us by means of Jesus' cross and resurrection before we do anything, before we say anything, before we are anybody.

The guy in my office, when I told him about God's love, he showed me his glasses. You remember, the coke-bottle-thick glasses with the black plastic lenses. He says, "These glasses have prisms in them, to help my eyes to focus." And he put them on, gave me a hug, and walked away.

Nothing like some good Lutheran theology to set somebody free.

God's love comes to us, in all the prisons where we live, before we do anything, say anything, are anybody. Sometimes that love will make us angry, or terrify us. That's the law. Sometimes that love will heal us and enchant us. That's the Gospel. Jesus brings that love to us by means of his cross and resurrection. Thanks be to God.