

Lenten Midweek – 2024

Repentance and Relief/Restoration/Freedom

1 Peter 5:1-11

John 8:21-38

The accused stands in the dock as the judge asks jury foreman to announce the verdict. After a long pause, the foreman says, “we, the jury, find the defendant not guilty. What does the defendant feel? When your feet have swollen a size and a half over the course of the day and finally, at 9:00p.m., you sit down and take your shoes off. What do you feel? You’ve been driving for hours; your bladder is over-full and you quickly park at a rest area and make a discrete, successful dash to the facility. What do you feel? Rumors of layoffs have been swirling around your workplace and the fatal day arrives and you’ve been spared. What do you feel? Your physician is concerned about some of your blood-work and orders an in-depth cancer screening. Two weeks pass before your results come back negative. What do you feel? Your spouse is on a 500 mile road-trip by herself and it’s now hours after she should have arrived. She’s not answering her phone and there’s news of a catastrophic pile-up on the freeway; then she calls to tell you that she is alright. What do you feel?

You know what relief is. Difficulty is real. Pain is real. Sometimes we fret. Sometimes we make mountains out of molehills. Sometimes potential drama invades our minds and we think that the worst is going to happen. Sometimes darkness clouds our hearts and all we can see is disaster on every front. Relief; it’s defined as a feeling of reassurance and relaxation following release from anxiety or distress. Spiritual relief; is it real or imagined? Is forgiveness genuinely cathartic? Have you ever felt your sins being released, removed from over your head, taken away from you? I’m not big on feelings because they can’t be trusted. But relief is a real thing. Restoration and freedom and a sweeping knowledge of God’s presence, God’s mercy; God’s forgiveness is a real thing. When the darkness of guilt is taken away and the light of Christ shines on the penitent, there is a corresponding sense of relief. When Jesus announced Himself to Mary at the tomb on Easter, one of the things that she felt was relief. Death and mourning were replaced. Joy, wonder, and a pulsing, wide-eyed faith enveloped Mary; resurrection brought relief from her burden.

Sin is a burden. Death is a burden. We’ve pulled back the layers of repentance during our Lenten journey. God’s Word about sin, the truth about sin’s destructive nature – the truth is both inescapable and liberating. Honesty is a product of knowing the truth. God values honesty. Repentance is, first of all, honest. Repentance does not lie. Repentance also knows that God alone can solve this problem. Faith throws itself entirely upon God’s mercy. Faith looks at Christ crucified and knows that God alone takes action to save us. Faith trusts God’s love. Repentance trusts God’s love. Honesty and faith and trust lead us to confess all of our sins, all of our tragic failings. The truth is that we have grieved God. The truth is that we have hurt our neighbor. Sin is real. Sin is not imaginary. Likewise, our guilt is real. Guilt is unpleasant. Guilt troubles us; rightfully so. By God’s design, guilt troubles our soul. Relief; God designed repentance to lead us to relief.

You know that God’s word sometimes carries more than one meaning. How many meanings, how deep and multifaceted is this phrase: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,

and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Christ is the truth. Christ’s life is embedded in God’s Word. God’s Word conveys the truth, conveys Christ’s death and resurrection, conveys forgiveness, life, and salvation. By God’s Word, by God’s Spirit, you know the truth. Jesus also said this; see if you can connect this bit to what He said about His Word, truth, and freedom. “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34).

A slave; Jesus called you a slave to sin. I’m not picking that stern morsel of the law out of thin air. I’m simply restating what the Son of God said about you, about me. Being a slave to sin does not sound like something that I want. How about you? This is not making a mountain out of a molehill. Slave to sin; that individual does not remain in the house forever. Everybody since forever, everybody since Jesus said those words has understood the house as a reference to heaven. In my Father’s house are many rooms. I go there to prepare a place for you (John 14:1-4). The Son who remains in the house is the Son who sets you free. The obedient Son of the eternal Father is the One who sets you free from being a slave to sin. Christ crucified is our house; now; here; with Him. We repent of our sins and seek refuge in the wounds of Christ. He is the One who sets us free. Christ crucified and risen is the only One who remains forever and we want to be found in Him. His blood is relief. His blood is restoration. His blood is freedom.

You know that I speak His words every Sunday. “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Relief; Restoration; Freedom; all of that comes cascading upon you through the words of absolution which convey all the power and efficacy of Jesus’ death upon the holy cross. You know the truth. You know the depth and beauty of multiple things all at once within the glorious boundaries of Christianity. You know the truth of your sin. At the same time you know the truth of Christ’s atoning death. And at the same time you know that God has established the office of the ministry to forgive sins. And at the same time you know that what is historically completed in Jesus’ death and resurrection is not bound by time and space but that His triumph envelops you as His Word is preached and as His sacraments are celebrated. And at the same time you know that you are a participant in the crowning events of salvation and all that brings you relief from your sins, relief from your guilt, relief from your fear. The wonder of relief comes to the penitent. The charade of denying the truth regarding sin keeps others from knowing genuine relief.

There are no slaves here. You have been set free. Sin is a vanquished captor. I understand guilt. I understand the difficulties of struggling against sin. Your sin is *not* greater than the shed blood of Christ. There is relief in that majestic suffering. Love gave all that it possessed for you to know relief. Love never ends. Divine love is where repentance leads. Restoration is where repentance leads. He restores us. He restores us not to some dusty, forlorn corner. God restores us by giving us the best seat, the royal garment of Christ’s righteousness. God restores us by giving us paradise. I know this about you: you know the truth. God has revealed it to you and you have been set free. You feel relief when you hear the Gospel. That is God at work. The beauty of Christ’s death and resurrection makes a palpable impression on your heart and mind. I know this about you: you manifest the fruit of repentance. You forgive others as you have been forgiven. You know what this next week brings. You know what holy week will bring. Wonder

upon wonder; God's glory and life unending; triumph and sacrifice; truth and freedom. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. The repentant are exultant.