

**I** saw a photo-essay on the internet of modern indentured servants, or, more like slaves, who worked for the owner of a grain mill in Korea. These were men who had no one—no friends, relatives, or family to lean on. They got the job working at the mill. They were given the room and board. They slept in the same room, ate the terrible diet, never visited doctors, and were hardly paid for their work. One 50 year old man looked like a 70 year-old. That man spent last 20 years of his life there.

The owner, owner's wife, their son and daughter all insisted that they did nothing wrong. Rather, they did them the favor of providing jobs, free meals, and a place to live. When they got sick, they insisted, they bought medicines for them; they did not go to a doctor, they said, because the workers did not feel like going.

The indentured servants initially were hostile to the investigators, because they feared that, once they cooperated with the

journalists, the owners would throw them out into the streets. It took a while to convince the workers that things were going to be alright.

Since it was clear that, as long as they stayed at the mill they would not be able to see things differently, the social service center asked the workers to move out and stay in the housing the center provided. The 50 year-old man smiled for the first time in a long while, when he went out shopping for his jacket and other personal items. The lawyer of the social service that did the exposé vowed to bring the owners to justice for the violation of multiple labor laws.

**T**his past summer, Palo Alto Weekly reported that certain undocumented workers from the south of the border were brought here by the human traffickers who charged them exorbitant fees. Once on this soil, the traffickers then held the undocumented workers until they pay off other expenses, usually under the duress that they would

be reported to the authorities, unless they complied. In the mean time, the workers must work their debt off, before the human predators let them go their own way.

It often escapes our attention, but less frequently, newspapers blurb about certain naturalized citizens who invite a domestic helper from their own motherland with the inflated promises, and turn the person into a domestic slave. The moment they set their foot on this soil, they begin accumulating debt: plane fare, room and board, food and clothing, etc. The undocumented workers could not tell the authorities, because they could not speak English, and because they feared deportation; they truly find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

Those who have power exploit the powerless, just because they could, legally and illegally. Once these people are indebted to some one or some organization, they could not be

free until they worked their debt off.

The degrees may vary, but people become indebted for what they want to have, or what they believe would have in the future. They must continue working, in order to achieve the freedom from the debt one day in the future. Employers know that people fear losing their jobs. They know that most people are willing to endure all kinds of dissatisfaction, oppression, abuse, or immoralities, so that they may pay off bills, put food on the table, and send their kids to school. And they will remind you how hard it is to look for a job, especially, during the recessions such as this. They know very well this threat of losing a job will keep their employees pliable.

We may live in a free society, but in a sense, we may not be so free as we want to believe, as far as financial or economic freedom is concerned. Some live little better than indentured servants, others are dependent on the jobs that do

not pay the living wage. Others live comfortably and opulently, thanks to those who cower at the thought of losing their jobs. Do you think the working poor should be only glad to have a job with no benefit, even though it pays not enough to sustain a family? Do you think that the working poor ask too much?

No one is saying that people should get things for free. You have to give something to get something. Isn't it the way the world is supposed to work? But what if someone showed up and said that you can receive something for nothing, and that you do not need to pay for it? What if that someone practiced it, by giving away great favors without any strings attached?

**I**f we read the stories of Jesus healing people, we would know that there is one common element throughout:

*Mark 5:34* - And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; **go in peace, and be healed of your disease.**

*Mark 10:52* - And Jesus said to him, "**Go your way; your faith has made you well.**" And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

*Luke 7:50* - And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; **go in peace.**"

*Luke 8:48* - And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; **go in peace.**"

*Luke 14:4* - But they were silent. Then he took him and healed him, and let him go.

*Luke 17:19* - And he said to him, "Rise and **go your way; your faith has made you well.**"

After having healed the person or persons, Jesus always tells the one to go his or her way.

**I**n our reading today, Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. It is a big deal: if someone saved your brother's life, because you asked, then you owe him a big one. But Jesus tells people: "Unbind him and let him go." There was no big media coverage. There was no binding contract.

It was done, and it was over.  
Quite anti-climactic, I'd say.

Wouldn't it be huge, if the hospital that operated on your cancer operation forgave all the charges? Why would Jesus never require the indebted to repay? Why was it all done for free? Here is one phrase that explains the reason why (Matt. 10:8):

*You received without paying, give without pay.*

That is the instruction Jesus gave to his disciples, as he sent them away on the mission trip. That is the principle the disciples have observed until today, when they went on missions and helped those who were in need. We do not charge them, and they do not have to pay us. It is all done in the name of Jesus, and it is all free. Then some of us might wonder: "What did I receive?"

**T**his is what: when we encounter Jesus, we experience the grace of God. Through this grace, we are moved and transformed.

Something happens in the deepest of the heart, and we desire to become more like Christ. This may not happen in one day, but we become inspired and motivated to make the progress on daily basis.

When we encounter Jesus, Jesus heals us, and then he sets us free, to go on and live our lives as a free human being. There is absolutely no condition to this freedom: no obligation, no debt. We have received without paying.

The historical, earthly Jesus hardly ever tried to make a proselyte. He is recorded to have called only a handful of people, and not everyone whom he called followed him: one had too much possession, others had to bury the dead father, got married, and had to test drive the new team of oxen.

Jesus never tried to make anyone feel indebted to him. Jesus was a religious man, for sure, but he never required anyone to be bound by his set of dogmas. He never taught catechism. He

never asked people to believe that the scriptures are the inerrant, literal word of God. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and proclaimed the good news to the poor. And people voluntarily decided to follow Jesus, even when discouraged by him not to.

**I** heard that a Florida man was fired from Home Depot, because he refused to take off from his uniform a button that said, "One Nation under God, indivisible." One may argue that this employee's right to the free speech and religion was infringed. That may be the case. But I see that the man turned God into a political statement.

Apart from the real reason the man was fired, which I would not know, I am wondering, if our God actually needs our political assistance, in order to feel believed and loved? If it were a simple expression of one's love for the nation and God, as the man claimed, why did the man have to do it at work during the company time, and have the button pinned to the company's

uniform? Is it how one expresses one's love for God and the nation?

**W**hat would regular person do, in order to express one's love for God? Wouldn't he donate to the food bank, do the tithing, volunteer at soup kitchen? Wouldn't he buy a lunch for the homeless guy who asked him for a quarter? Or, would he wear a button, instead?

What would a regular person do, in order to express one's love for the nation? Wouldn't he pay the tax, support the health care measure that covers all the Americans, and pray for the American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan? Or, would he wear a button, instead?

**U**nlike Jesus, the modern Christianity seems to demand from the believers that they accept certain set of the religious dogmas. The religious dogmas have replaced freedom in Jesus Christ, and they have become the imposing, if not binding, force. This kind of religion does not

any longer set people free; it cannot heal or restore people; instead, it imposes itself upon people, and binds their lives through legislations and political campaigns.

Although Jesus told the people to go in peace, people are not free to go in peace. Although Jesus told the people to "go your own way," they cannot: they are now indebted and bound by the religious obligations, and they are not free to go their own ways: they have a pre-determined way to follow.

**T**he true religion is like this: it has the power to heal and restore. It sets you free either to follow or not to follow. There are no strings attached. In this religion, there is no such a thing as "You owe me something." Or, conversely, "I owe you nothing." Everything is given with gladness. Everything is received with thankfulness. Everything is done voluntarily, from the heart.

**J**esus said in the Gospel of John: "You will know the truth, and the

truth will set you free (8:32)." Jesus also said: "I came, so that you might have life, and have it abundantly (10:10)." If Jesus came indeed to give us the abundant life, Jesus also knew that that abundance could not be lived without first having been set free.

That freedom is the undercurrent in the story of the prodigal son. We are free to leave the father's house and try our wits in the world. And we are also free to return to the father's house, if we find ourselves lost.

And when we do, we would know that the father had been waiting for us all this time. We would also know that the father would heal us and restore us to the family. That is the religion Jesus taught to everyone. That is the religion that will save us, heal us, and restore us.