

Sunday, October 31, 2021 – Reformation Day

“What is Freedom?”

John 8: 31-36

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Definition structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Happy Reformation Day! Many of us love this day – the pomp and circumstance built into the time of worship. Bold, tried and true song favorites. There’s the flavor of resistance against an outside oppressive authority and the opportunity to speak the truth against that authority – just the right mix of righteous steadfastness a tasteful dash of subversion thrown on top.

Often for Lutherans Reformation Day is a little bit like the 4th of July. The hog dogs are replaced by bratwurst, there are no fireworks and there’s a chill in the air, but there is a certain sense of pride, of identity, of belonging that comes with this day. It’s a little like our patriotic sentiments on the Fourth of July. Luther’s 95 Theses nailed to the church door in Wittenberg are the inciting event, like the signing of the Declaration. Luther, our Washington, stands up to a tyrannous, out-of-touch distant power and helped unshackle the church from burdensome teachings that are found nowhere in the Bible. Why else would we see Jesus talking about His Word setting us free in the appointed Gospel lesson for this day? That’s exactly what the Reformation is about, right? Freedom for our church independence day?

Today we’re going to dig into what Jesus means by freedom. As we learn what being free is from God’s perspective it will inform not only the teachings about freedom that come to us out of the time of the Reformation but also what God has to say to us today and how we use the freedom Jesus gives us.

Jesus tells the crowd in our Gospel text that the truth will set them free. And what is the truth? He is the truth – His message, that He is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him, that’s truth. Knowing the truth is equal to knowing and believing that Jesus is the Son of God. Believing in Jesus is being steeped in His Word. Being His disciple is living and being as Jesus teaches and promises.

Unfortunately the crowd following Jesus, which was believing in Him based on what He had to say in his teachings moments before, suddenly turned on Him. He said the truth *will* set you free. As if they weren't free already! A birthright, as the children of God, their freedom is! It is conveniently glossed over as they insist they've been slaves to no one that since the time of Abraham they were enslaved in Egypt, and then after a few hundred years of freedom, ten of the twelve tribes were destroyed by the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians made the rest captive, and then were under control of the Persians, the Greeks and now, the Romans.

But more to the point, Jesus isn't speaking about earthly freedom. He's talking about slavery to sin. The slavery that led so many ancestors to walk in ways that were not steeped in God's Word or living as a disciple of the one true God. Truth, and freedom can only be found in Him.

And that's the thing, isn't it? Being told someone needs to *make* you free strikes at the core of whether or not it was ever really your birthright in the first place. Someone making you free says you needed help. Being set free means perhaps you aren't the one who gets to define terms of what freedom means, where the responsibilities lie for those who exercise their freedom, or where the limits on our freedom are. Jesus is not speaking of a post-Enlightenment concept of freedom that springs out of English philosophers like John Locke or Thomas Paine. This is something entirely different.

Martin Luther wrestled through these questions in his own time, a time before any widespread modern concept of rights-based freedom. For Luther, the church was in bondage when the teaching of the pure Gospel – that Jesus takes away your sin and sets you free from its' consequences – is obscured by some focus on your doing enough to make God happy with you, by a church dispensing forgiveness in as stingy and cynical a moneymaking method as could be – teaching that you could buy off your forgiveness with the right sized contribution. Here too, freedom is something else entirely than having control over the circumstances of your life and the choices that you make. For Luther freedom is... a lot like what Jesus talks about in John 8. Knowing the truth, knowing Jesus, sets you free.

Sets you free for what? Probably not the kind of freedom you're thinking. Certainly not the typically understood American, 4th of July kind of freedom. Luther used terms like bondage and captivity in several of his writings. One of those is a series of letters written with a guy named Erasmus brought into a book called "The Bondage of the Will." And his main argument there is that you have no freedom – zero, zip, zilch, nada – to choose to believe in God. You have no free will in anything pertaining to why you're saved or believing in Him. Jesus, after all, sets you free, as you know the truth – namely, He Himself.

So freedom is not about my free will, self-determination or choices in life but instead about Jesus' will taking over and overwriting your default, sin-sick programming with an entirely new program, imposed from the outside upon you by God. Freedom is being conformed to what Jesus says, the restore disk that returns your operating system back to the way God designed it to work, without sin. That's what disciples do – they are disciplined, taught, and molded to think, speak and act like their Master. Now, instead of operating by your buggy, sin-filled programming you're free to work right with your upgraded Jesus influence, loving and serving the people around you the way Jesus would do it. He has made you into something different and new. That's the wonderful rediscovery of the Reformation, and it informs our lives today.

Because you see friends, this freedom celebration at the Reformation is quite different, opposite almost, even, from the proactive self-declaration of freedom from outside tyranny. The freedom of which Jesus speaks is your liberation *from* sin, death and hell. The freedom Jesus gives is not one of self-determination, courage or sacrifice but one accomplished by He who sets us free. A Reformation celebration is not about a rebellious hero-founder who liberates the institution of the church, but about a Son of God who sets us free through the truth taught in His Word – that we are not saved by what we do, how we live or how we please but rather through what God has accomplished for us in Jesus. Real freedom is being overridden, molded, shaped and changed into someone new. Real freedom is based on

staying permanently *dependent* on God's Word, the truth Jesus gives that sets us free. Real freedom always serves the other person before ourselves, the disciples, completely shaped by the teaching of the Master. Gospel freedom. Real freedom sacrifices rights, sacrifices what we *can* do or *want* or *determine* to be best for ourselves in favor of what is best for others. This is how Jesus sets you free, and Jesus is through whom you are set free. Happy Dependence Day! In Jesus' name, Amen.