

John 8:31-36

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free, the 32nd verse of the 8th Chapter of John. On this Reformation Sunday we are going to think about freedom. Freedom is such a good word. This is what Martin Luther, who you know was the creator of Reformation Sunday, said about freedom, “a denial of freedom to an individual is a denial of life itself, the very character of the life of man demands freedom” (*A Testament of Hope*, p.119). He did insist though that there are limits to freedom, limits given by God (*Ibid*, p.120).

From what are we set free? Free from sin, Jesus says. And in our Second Lesson from Romans, Paul teaches our freedom is from the law. Roman 3:19-20 tell us, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.” Luther offers interesting reflections on the nature of our bondage to sin, how and why we can’t stop sinning. He says, “The world is like a drunken peasant. If you lift him into the saddle on one side, he will fall off on the other side. One can’t help him no matter how one tries” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 54, p. 111). And Luther’s bishop at the time, Albert of Mainz, describes sin even more poignantly, “I know very well that without God’s grace there is nothing good in me, and that I am as much a piece of useless, stinking [feces] as anyone else, if not more” (Reported in Heiko Oberman, *Luther*, p. 108).

In grace through faith in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven. Our works do not matter when it comes to salvation. But won’t that lead to cheap grace, to the lessening of Christian responsibility? No, absolutely not. We do good works, but not because they give us salvation, rather it is out of a response to what we have been freely given. The freedom the reformers taught, the freedom God has given us, is not a “do what you please” without limits. In last week’s gospel reading from Mark, we heard Jesus tell us that those who wish to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. Martin Luther says that “a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 31, P. 344).

Freedom from sin releases us from our overwhelming concern for and preoccupation with ourselves. Not because we say we are no longer selfish, but because God has turned our interest toward caring for others, like those of you who give of your money, time, and self. Like those who served on Thursday at the Holy Trinity sloppy joe dinner. Like those of you who stock the little pantry, making sure others have food to eat. Like those of you who have sent donations toward the hurricane relief. Like those of you who make quilts so others can stay warm. Like those of your who donated coats so kids can be warm this winter, or will donate to the mitten tree to keep kids warm. Like those of you who volunteer and donate to so many who are in need. Like those who pray for others. The focus is on the care and comfort of those in need. We do this because God has blessed us to be a blessing to others.

The freedom of the gospel gets us free from ourselves. It also gets us free from the chains of the past. Our sins have been forgiven. We are free of them. Our old self has been replaced by our new self who is living as a follower of Christ.

How many times have you decided not to do something because you feel inadequate? How many times have you decided not to do something you really wanted

to do because you tried it before and failed? Consider this... by not doing what you want to do because you failed at it before you are keeping yourself chained to the past. How many times did Henry Ford fail? How many times did the Wright brothers fail? Did you know that Thomas Edison failed a minimum of 2000 times before he produced a light bulb? He looked at each failure as a success at finding what will not work.

Is there something in the church that we aren't giving a second chance because it failed when we tried it before?

Is there someone whom we know we are holding back because they failed at what they did the last time they tried, and we aren't willing to give them a second chance? I served a church where there was a talented musician who, after tragic circumstances in his life, became an alcoholic. After he turned his life to Christ and stopped drinking, he began to attend church. He hadn't attended before; he only came because he was included in a concert series at the church and decided to return for worship services. The people of that congregation could not see beyond his past mistakes, they couldn't see how his life had been turned around when he accepted Christ as his savior, and welcome him into their worship. He tried, but eventually he left and found a church where he was welcome.

I don't see that happening here. I see you lovingly reach out to those who come to worship with us. I wonder what it would take to have some of those who come here for non-church related meetings to begin worshipping with us.

Why are we different, why do we freely welcome the stranger among us? Because we know that through Jesus Christ we have been freed from our sin and others have had that same experience. We know that in Christ all things are made new. That is, we are being made righteous by grace through faith. Where the dominant view of salvation in our culture is that we are never sure if we have done enough good works to be saved, as Christ followers we know that we can do nothing to save our self. We are saved by grace through faith. This is God's righteousness. It is an external righteousness. It is the essence of the reformation.

According to Martin Luther it is impossible to be happy if we see God as an irate judge of sin. Uncertain as we can be about our salvation, we have received everything from God. Jesus paid the price so we can be debt free.

The reformation message is a great message of confidence and comfort. It's a freeing message, one that allows us to know that we are free from our sin. We are free from our doubts. We are set free to serve.

Freedom is indeed a compelling, joyful reality, one filled with joyful service. We are loved by the triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; we are loved with God's freeing love.

All glory be to God.