



Pastor Gwen's Sermon
Reformation Sunday
Sunday, October 29, 2023

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

Happy Reformation Day. Today is one of two days that we celebrate our freedom. There is of course the Fourth of July when we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence and then today, Reformation Sunday, when we celebrate the nailing of the 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg by Martin Luther. There are many similarities to these two events, and the freedom they celebrate. There are also significant differences that are highlighted in our gospel text today. These differences enable us to deepen our faith in Jesus Christ and broaden our experience of true freedom in our abundant life.

Today many people would be offended if we told them that they are not truly free. Many people look for freedom because they have the misguided idea that freedom will bring them peace. They believe that freedom is found in being independent of any and all things except themselves. The interesting paradox about that definition of freedom is that it is self-centered, and we have a way of putting ourselves right back in situations that have some form of bondage. In reality, very few Americans, if any, are truly free.

First of all, many people imprison themselves financially. Credit card debt is piled sky high for most families. The repayment of student loan debt is coming due again and people are worried about where they will get the extra money to pay another bill. Everything is more expensive today than it was 2, 3 or 5 years ago, and wages have not kept up, so credit cards are bulging.

Secondly, we allow our schedule and full calendars to rule our lives. I remember when I got my first Palm Pilot, electronic calendar. Remember back that far, it was the new little device with the plastic stick for writing. Well, I loved it as I put everything, I was to do in it. Then each Monday I would print off a week's worth of activities so Rodney would know where I was and for how long. At least that is what I told myself, that it was for Rodney. Really it was for me, so I could be on time for all my important appointments. Hugh.

Another deterrent to true freedom is that we find its definition in the bigger and better. The bigger fancier car, the newest tablet or cell phone, the nice and spacious home, and the most fashionable clothing are considered signs of prestige or freedom to be on top. Through all this we chain ourselves to worry and concern over keeping the lifestyle that we have attained, not only for our sake but for that of our neighbors.

All of these things sound like slavery to me. Chained to debt, to schedules, and the quest for the best stuff possible. People try again and again to convince themselves that this is freedom, this is what it means to have it all. We live in a society that is in total denial of what freedom is really all about.

But I am here to tell you that first and foremost, we are all sinners, slaves to sin, if you will. That means that our freedom can be aloof if we try to go it alone. We may go through periods of selective amnesia where we feel like we are free to just be, but those times usually don't last long. Problems get too big, and we cannot handle everything: our debt, our schedules and our stuff become overwhelming. There has to be a better way to have freedom. There must be a better way to live life abundantly without the stress that comes from the longing for freedom and peace.

Well, the example I read this week was that freedom is like a guitar string. It can be rolled up and placed in a package, like when you purchase new strings, right Jack? It is free, the string that is, not the price you pay for it. But important here is the fact that it is not free to be what it was supposed to be and what it was made to do. That only happens when it is strung down the long neck of a guitar and the keys are turned and tightened until it is taut. Its freedom comes, not in being separated from everything; but in being set apart to be in something. Make sense? The string is free in the package in the guitar case, but not free to be what it was made to be an E, A, D, G, B, or high E string. And when combined with the other strings it can make beautiful music together. And so, it is with our freedom. Not freedom from something but freedom for something is true freedom.

Martin Luther got that. He was a brave, confident, vibrant leader of faith: a man who is considered to be one of the most influential people in history, a man who God used to change our understanding of God's Word, who tenaciously pursued the truth, who renewed the proclamation of the Gospel. But he came to this by way of fear. Martin Luther, like the Pharisees in our reading in John, did all the right things. He devoted himself to the study of God's Word, he took monastic vows and became a model monk. He made trips to adore the holy relics. He confessed his sins with forthrightness and a burning passion.

By human standards, he had every right to feel secure, to feel free, maybe even to be a little smug about his freedom. Even his church, at the time told him so. He followed all the rules, and they lauded him for the life he chose. They told him he had peace because of who he was and what he did. Luther could have sat back and relaxed and enjoyed his position in life. But he did not.

Even in his station in life he realized that he was not free. Luther in fact, felt bound, hopeless and in despair. As he tried harder and harder to overcome this feeling, he fell even shorter. There would never be enough holy relics to see to ease his heart. His vows would never be kept perfectly enough to rest his soul. There would never be enough study

to ease his worry. He could never deny himself enough pleasures to cleanse his body. And certainly, there would never be enough time to confess all his sins.

Because Luther was taught to rely on his own works for his freedom, he realized that it was never enough. He was never enough. The more he fought to be good, the more he realized he was not. For Luther this was like trying to run in quicksand. Over and over again he felt Satan gaining hold over his self-envisioned freedom. Luther was tortured by his own conscience and paralyzed by his own sin. He sank to the pit of personal despair. These feelings forced Luther to confront the reality of God's Holiness in light of his own frailty.

I for one, am thankful that God led Luther to that point. Because there, in that desperate position, the Holy Spirit led Luther to seek the truth. It was the plain and simple truth of God's Word.

God gave Luther the courage to look past the man-made rules, the invented human tradition, the flawed teaching of much of the Roman church, to see what God really had to say to sinners in His Word. In the Bible, Luther sought and found the truth. Luther found a different kind of righteousness and freedom that does not come from us, but rather comes from Christ.

Three years after nailing the 95 Theses to the church door, Martin Luther wrote another document called, "The Freedom of a Christian". The quote repeated in that document is:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

For Luther, there was joy in discovering that the simple truth that Jesus suffered and died to pay the price we cannot pay. Christ righted all the wrongs Luther could not. Christ died to set us free. Luther found this good news in Scripture alone. (*sola scriptura*). Luther found that it was only by God's grace (*sola Gratia*) of sending his only Son Jesus Christ (*sola Christos*) to die on the cross, that we are truly free to live an abundant and joyful life. This is God's truth and Luther made it his mission to tell the world the truth. Thus, the Reformation of the church of God where the truth is only found in God's Word.

This freedom that Martin Luther found in Scripture is the same freedom we hear in the Gospel here today. It is a message that is still alive, that is still relevant, that we still need to hear week after week, day after day, and hour after hour. Just this week I got a message from a dear friend. It was an email about Jesus. It said Gwen did you know that, "Jesus died over 2000 years ago and nobody has ever referred to him as the late Jesus." Interesting thought isn't it. Not even the heathens. Nowhere in history is Jesus ever referred to in the past tense. He **is** the Living God.

And He makes us three promises in His Word today; We will truly be his disciples. We will know the truth. And the truth will make us free. Reading Scripture, adhering to his teachings and keeping his commandments are a great start to finding freedom in Jesus. Prayer, surrounding ourselves with other Christians, worship, and certainly giving to God are all ways to make us good disciples and keep our connection to Jesus and his truth vibrant.

We need to rely on the truth of Jesus Christ, the living God. This is the truth of salvation, and we need to focus on Scripture for the answers. For, we do not want to slip back into that quick-sand and let the devil take hold of our lives. We cannot let our debt, our busy schedules, and our stuff trick us into thinking they create freedom. For when we place our hope in such things, we deny the truth and our faith in Jesus gets compromised.

A story I read this week. In the late 1850's a successful businessman from England visited St Louis. As he walked around the city, he came upon a slave auction on the courthouse steps. Among those chained to be auctioned, he noticed one man, much bigger and stronger than the others. Unlike the rest, this man held his head erect, looking straight ahead as still as a statue. And a statue he might have been, except for the great tears that traced shiny rivers down his face. When the man stood to be sold, the price quickly went to a thousand dollars. The Englishman called out, "Fifteen hundred dollars," and all the other bids stopped.

After paying the accountant, the merchant, followed a few paces behind by his new "property" walked off. After they turned a corner and were out of sight of the crowd, the Englishman turned. "You can go now," he said. "You are free!" The other man stood still, gazing at him through narrowed eyes. He did not seem to understand. "I said you are free. I have bought your freedom. You are no longer a slave." The man did not seem to understand. "Please, you are free," the merchant said again. "You can do what you want to." The former slave finally smiled. "Don't you see?" he said, "I want to serve you."

Yes, Christ freed us from slavery to sin and gives us true freedom. His teaching, healing, preaching while on earth were, in my opinion, with the first great reformation. The second began in 1517 when Martin Luther led by the Holy Spirit, came to understand the good news, the Gospel. We can never be free until we too understand that it is not about what we do, but rather about what has been done for us by Christ. And we come to realize that our freedom was not free. God gave us his only son to die for us so that we could have true freedom and the peace that comes from knowing He will always love us and walk with us until He calls us home to eternal life.

So have yourself your own Reformation each day as we begin a new and believe, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." **AMEN**