

Sermon Reformation 2021

October 31, 2021

John 8:31-36

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

In our Gospel Lesson this morning, we heard words of Jesus that are so precious, **“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** Now as I say those words are precious, I say this for multiple reasons. First of all, we have to acknowledge the appreciation for those words on their literal level as we do in lots of places. When the truth about circumstances comes out, it is freeing. About a month ago when talking about humility and not bringing accusations too quickly, I mentioned the story of a pastor who was accused of philandering because a witness supposedly saw him pick up a young woman at a train station. In the midst of the accusation the truth was freeing when it became clear that this wasn't a random young woman, but the pastor's daughter. On that level, the truth sets us free

But then there is the heart of that meaning, Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and as that Truth He sets us free. And as He says in our lesson today, **“if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”** And there is the freedom that is freedom at its best. We speak of freedom in our country and how it is its greatest asset. And I've made the point before, but sadly we have equated freedom with license, without realizing that there is a freedom that Christ gives to us that brings us into a responsibility. That freedom is the life in Him. But of course, that means there is a bondage too, there is a slavery.

As we look back five hundred and four years this morning at Luther nailing the 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg Germany, we see the reflection of a bondage there too. And as we have these readings for the Reformation this morning, that's where we're going to start: with Luther. If you recall the story, Luther nailed those these on the door of the church because he was upset. The pope in Rome had declared that he could sell indulgences, Luther's bishop, Albrecht of Mainz, had signed on to this selling, both in view of the income they could get: the pope for building St. Peter's; Albrecht for paying back the loan he'd taken out with the Fuggar family to pay for his office as bishop. And so Albrecht, agreeing to pass earnings back to Rome, sent John Tetzel to Germany and take the money of the peasants there. Tetzel went, then from

town to town calling out with his product slogan, “Every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” And the people flocked to it. They wanted Mother and Father, Aunt Frieda and Uncle Johann freed from their suffering. And this infuriated Luther. He watched as the people who could barely afford food skimmed to scrape together the coins for Tetzels coffer. He said, “If the pope can forgive sins, why is he charging for it?” So, he sat down with his pen and began a war.

To the point of the Gospel lesson, he realized there was this bondage. The Church had bound itself to this man made authority. The Scriptures nowhere demanded that there be allegiance to the Pope. Yes, Matthew 16 called Peter a rock, but when Jesus said He would build His Church on the rock, it wasn't Peter, it was the rock of the confession that this Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And when Jesus told Peter that He was giving Him the keys such that whatever Peter bound on earth would be bound in heaven and whatever Peter forgave on earth would be forgiven in heaven, He gave the same authority to all the disciples in chapter 18 of the same book, and again to all of them John 20. Was Peter the head of those disciples? Sure, and you could see that, but he wasn't the pope as was taught. And so there was this bondage of the Church to this manmade authority. And just as bad within that, there was this bondage to the teaching that you had to earn heaven; that to get to heaven you had to be good enough. Luther himself had lived that. That was how he had become a monk in the first place. He saw the life his father wanted for him as a lawyer as less than a faithful service to God, and so in concern with earning heaven signed up at the monastery.

But the Word had freed Him. It had revealed the freedom of this Son, that heaven was not something earned by the good works of a monk, nor was it bought on the paper signed by the pope. Instead, it was won by the blood of Christ poured out on Calvary. Luther saw it. The Son had set Him free, and so He was free indeed.

As we hear that and celebrate the joy of the rediscovery of the Gospel for the Church in the Reformation, I think it's worthwhile to consider that the Church suffers under a bondage now in our time and place. It's significantly different in that it's not about indulgences and papers signed in Rome, but there's bondage around us, isn't there? What is it? Well, I'm sure that we could think of a myriad of forms, but when I look around I see the bondage of our culture. There is a self-righteousness that manifests itself very openly in our day and time. If you don't toe just the right line and say just the right words. If you don't confess just the right sins of racism and bigotry, and homophobia, and transphobia, and fat phobia, and sexism and all the like, then you

prove you aren't righteous. And you're out. It creates a bondage around the Church, because then the message can't be spoken that our bondage isn't under this oppression of white, male, Christian, hetero and cisnormativity, but under the oppression of sin, death, and the devil. And the Church has to compete with many other voices. Prophets who write the rules of this righteousness and are publicized by celebrity disciples on media and social media.

But that's in our culture, the Church itself suffers internally as well. She suffers from all sorts of influences that draw her to want to think like this culture. On the one hand you see this in line with those pressures very significantly. The push to give in to this justice because of our God who is for justice—which by the way is true. God is for justice, according to His standard. But there's pressure to look to the world to determine that justice. And this pressure to look to the world isn't limited to that. There's a pressure to look to the world to determine what the Church should look like, how she should gauge her success. Pressure to make sure that we increase in numbers and popularity. Pressure to adapt to the world so that the world will like us. Pressure to cling to our own celebrity disciples who have shown their own ability to draw the world in to the Church.

I've been listening this week to a podcast about a church called Mars Hill and the fall of that church especially of their celebrity pastor named Mark Driscoll. Now, I'm assuming most of you have not heard of Mark Driscoll, but he started this church, Mars Hill, out in Seattle of all places. And he was known for being theologically conservative, but kind of rebellious in his attitude about it. And between that and call to men to be responsible—honestly a fair message for young men of our age to hear—he ended up drawing 15,000 people into the church there. But sadly because of his domineering personality, the church fell apart. The podcast notes that a part of this was due to the appeal of the celebrity pastor. In this case, it noted this was a pastor with significant charisma but insufficient character to lead people. But there's this pressure to be associated with fads in the church because of our celebrity culture. You can see it with Mark Driscolls, and Purpose Driven Rick Warrens, and Seeker Driven Willow Creeks, and even back to Robert Schullers and Billy Grahams. And that's not to say that these celebrity teachers are all wrong in their teaching, or that they're not motivated by a real desire to seek and to save the lost. But there's this flocking that people to do them because it of the pressure of our culture. And this is a bondage.

But thanks be to God, the Son sets us free from all bondage and slavery. You see all of this, the bondage of the Catholic Church at the time of Luther, the bondage of our day to false understandings of justice and appeal to celebrity, that all reflects a misdirected trust. And what is trust? What's another word that we equate to trust? Faith. This is all a misdirected faith. And misdirected faith is the root of what? Every other sin. Every sin finds its root in the faith and trust in something besides our Lord. And we are all slaves to this sin.

But if the Son sets you free you are free indeed. And He has set you free. He has set you free from sin. His death has taken your place under the curse of the Law. The death you deserve to die, He died in your place so that the punishment of your guilt is taken upon Him. Now sin has no claim to punish you. That means that death too has been satisfied. You deserve to die because that's the wage of sin, but when sin is forgiven, now you are freed from death's burden. Yes, it still stings your body, you still suffer its consequences now, but once you pass through the death of your body, you will live in the resurrection of Jesus, not in the death which is eternal and deserved. And the one who bound you to all of this, devil himself, now has no claim on you either. Just as he rounded you up like a tyrannical taskmaster, abusing and using you, you have been freed from that abuse and his claim on you. Now the Son has taken you and written His Name on you so that you are clearly His and no one else's.

Yes, there is all of this bondage, but in Christ you are free. That's the joy of what we're celebrating on this Reformation Sunday. We're celebrating that Luther dove into the Scriptures, the Word of God, and learned what the Spirit has to teach us there: that we are purchased and redeemed in the blood of Christ, that we are freed from our imperfect works, from our sin, from death, and even from the devil. And as he found that, he proclaimed it against the bondage of the Church teaching a salvation of works, bringing freedom to those there. And for us, we can hear it as the freedom to need to please the world, or look like the world, or find our influence in the world. Instead, we can hear that freedom that is in Christ. And that as we abide in His Word, we will truly be His disciples and we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. Freedom we know in His Word alone, freedom we have by His grace alone, freedom we have in faith alone, and freedom we have by the Son alone. Because when He sets us free we are free indeed. Amen.