

October 28, 2007
Reformation Sunday

"The Truth Sets Us Free"

JOHN 8:31-36

T*o the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" ³⁴ Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

I am holding in my hand a set of car keys. Can you remember that moment you were first given the keys by your parents to drive by yourself? You had the freedom to go where ever you wanted to go. With that freedom came the responsibility to drive carefully, stop at the stop signs, not speed, and certainly not back into someone in the parking lot.

In the words just read to you Jesus speaks about freedom, the freedom that comes with knowing the truth about him as our Lord and God, and also knowing him as the Savior who rescues us from our sin. There is no greater freedom in life than knowing what is going to happen to you when you die, or knowing that your life has purpose and meaning, or knowing that God's mercy and God's love will always be there for you. Along with this freedom comes the responsibility of staying away from sin that easily trap us and enslave us.

On this Reformation Sunday we think of how enslaved Martin Luther was to false teaching. Then the truth of God's Word entered into his life and set him free in Christ. Instead of living every day in fear because he did not know what would happen to him if he died, he started living in the glorious freedom of knowing he had been declared righteous before God through what Jesus did for him. Martin Luther knew that this precious freedom could be lost if people opened themselves up to sin and false teaching. That is why he wrote the catechism so fathers could teacher the truth of God's Word to their children and preserve that freedom in Christ. That is why he wrote hymns based on the truths of God's Word, not feelings and emotions, so Christians could gather for worship and sing about that freedom and not lose it. That is why he translated the Bible into a language people could read and understand for themselves. It is the truth of God's Word that sets us free.

The truth has set us free

Jesus tells us, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Can't you see Jesus standing up and talking to various groups of people as they gathered in the temple courts for worship? He wanted people to know the truth of who he was and how he had come to rescue them. He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus did not say, "There are many different beliefs and religions in the world. You have to find what suits you best, follow it, and you can be saved." Jesus

made the exclusive claim that he was the light of the world. He told people that to hold on to what he taught and they would find the ultimate freedom, the light of life, eternal salvation.

When you listen to the words of Jesus here in the Bible, you come to know the truth about yourself. In Matthew 19 Jesus told us that God made people male and female from the beginning. Think of the freedom that you have this morning because you know about your origin. Jesus says that you were created male and female. You did not evolve. Even marriage and family were given to you by the Lord. You also discover the truth of why you do the things you do that are not pleasing to God. It was Jesus who said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man unclean...." Why do I have bad thoughts, or fail to show love and kindness to people as I should? According to Jesus you cannot blame your parents, or blame you genes, or blame your friends, or blame it on some personality disorder. You are responsible to God for who you are. The blame rests with you.

Jesus was always eager to tell people the truth of how they could not save themselves so they would see the freedom he had to give them. A man once came to Jesus with the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked him if he knew the commandments. He was able to give the perfect summary. "Love the Lord God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus told him if he did these things he could have eternal life. But then the man asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Do I have to be good to all people all the time? Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to show how all of us fail to show the kindness and love to other as we should, and we certainly don't love the Lord God with all our heart, soul and mind as we should. That's our Jesus. He shows us the truth about ourselves to free us from the false hope that we all have in ourselves from our birth.

Jesus was always telling people the truth about himself so that they would come to believe in him. Earlier in this chapter he said this about himself, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be, and the I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me." Jesus wants us to look up to him and see him lifted up on the cross, not to make us feel miserable for what our sin did to him, but to trust in his death as the perfect sacrifice and payment for what we had done wrong. To help a man named Nicodemus Jesus said, "Just Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life." The people who were bitten by snakes could be free from pain and death if they just looked up to the brass snake that Moses lifted up in the desert. The greatest truth you can ever learn in your life is this truth that Jesus was lifted up to save you from your sin.

When you look at the life of Martin Luther you discover a man who lived in daily fear that he had to do something to make up for what his sin had done to Jesus on the cross. The cross of Jesus was not a place he turned to for comfort and peace, but a cruel reminder that he was never doing enough to make amends for what his sin had caused to happen to Jesus. Then the truth came to Martin through the teachings of the Bible. He realized that the just or righteous people live by faith in what Jesus did to free them, not by faith what they do to make up for what they had done wrong. Listen to how he describes that freedom that comes from knowing the truth in a sermon he preached on John 3:16. "But if I do see God's wrath, I know that this is drives me to the Son, where I find refuge; and

if I come to the Son, I also have a merciful Father.”

What freedom is ours when we live each day of life with the firm conviction and solid truth that the Almighty God is our merciful heavenly Father! Joyfully we speak about this freedom that comes with God’s mercy through Jesus when we say with the psalmist. “O give thanks unto the Lord for he is good and his mercy endures forever?” Do you really believe God’s mercy is yours forever? Then you know the truth and the truth has made you free!

The truth will keep us free

The Jewish believers who listened to Jesus were fragile people. They were new believers who needed even more of the truth of Jesus words in their lives to keep this freedom. Notice how they respond to Jesus words about freedom. “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free? These people did not like hearing about freedom because they were stilling finding refuge in believing that they were free because they were God’s chosen people, descendants of Abraham.

How easy it is to slip into this way of thinking even today. I was born of Christian parents. I pray ever day. I go to Star of Bethlehem Lutheran Church. I am a Lutheran. It is not our family connection, or even church affiliation that makes us Christians and gives us freedom. It is always Jesus and only Jesus.

Jesus had to warn these people about becoming slaves to sin so they would not lose the freedom that was theirs because they believed in him. “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” If we are led by the truth to see the freedom we have in Christ, then we want to stay away from sin that can enslave us and trap us into living certain ways that might even lead to rejecting Jesus and losing the freedom we have in him. When you first took the keys of the car, you did not say, “Now I can drive recklessly and wildly, “Now I can run this car in the ditch, or whip around the corner 90 miles per hour, or run the red light.” Such strange behavior could easily lead you to lose your license or lose the privilege of driving the car, or even cost you your life!

Opening yourself up to sin after you are free in Christ immediately exposes you to the grave danger of making excuses for that sin and justifying it. This past week I was reading from 1 Peter for my personal devotions. How clearly Peter warns the new Christians that they need to stay away from sin. “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what the pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation and they heap abuse on you.” The freedom we have in Christ from the punishment of our sin is such a dynamic force in our lives that it leads us to not want anything to do with the bondage and slavery a life of sin offers.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer of the church, knew from his own personal life and from the lives of others that the freedom in Christ needed to be protected by God’s Word. He wrote the *Small Catechism* to help fathers teach their children. It was in the catechism

Luther wrote about the freedom we have in Christ. "He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally." Thank God the truth has set us free and it will keep us free! Amen.