

"True Freedom"

John 8:31-36

October 28, 2018

Reformation Day (Observed)

I want to let you in on a little secret. It's no longer all that fun to be a fan of the Chicago Cubs. Oh, we were flying high in 2016 when the Cubs won the World Series. But now something is changed. I'm not talking about the fact that they are not playing in the World Series this year. I'm over that. I'm talking about how it feels to be a Cubs fan now. In the past, people who were not Cubs fans (and maybe were a bit hostile to Cubs' fans) accused us of wallowing in our lack of success on the baseball diamond. They accused us of being "Lovable Losers" who actually liked that designation. We weren't really interested in actually winning, critics alleged, but were more interested in whining about how cursed we were, how the Cubs hadn't won a National League pennant since 1945 or a World Series since 1908, and other such stuff. We would always say, "Wait till next year!" with some sort of half believed optimism. But we were more interested in wallowing in defeat than actually looking forward to victory. Maybe they were right.

Now that the Chicago Cubs have won the World Series, people say we have nothing left to whine about. That's true. We can't complain about being "Lovable Losers" because we are now fans of the team that has been consistently winning over the past 4 years. We can no longer delight in saying that we haven't won since 1908 and complaining that we haven't won since 2016 seems silly. In other words, it seems to me that it is more fun and interesting to lose and be in the struggle to win than in actually winning. Once you win, it's no longer exciting. In fact, it can become quite boring.

Today is Reformation Day, a day which once was very exciting, but now has become boring to many people, especially to us Lutheran Christians. This used to be a very important day to which we all looked forward. In addition to a special morning worship service to commemorate Reformation Day, there were huge rallies and events held in honor of Reformation Day which were well attended. In fact, our Central Circuit of the Montana District used to have a joint worship service on this day to celebrate the Reformation. However, there are few such celebrations anymore. And, as far as our celebration in the Central Circuit goes, it's gone too. After struggling for years to hold the service, it finally died due to lack of interest.

Why the change? Maybe, after the struggle of the Reformation of the Christian church went through, we were happy for the victory, but, like Cub fans after their victory, we have become complacent. We have forgotten how the serious conflict which caused the Reformation in the first place and we have become bored with the victory.

What is Reformation Day all about? Well, we know it has something to do with Martin Luther and, as a result, the celebration of this day can degenerate into a theological or ecclesiastical pep rally. The big question addressed by Reformation Day is, "How does a person become right with God?" Our natural inclination tells us that trying to be good is the way to become right with God and go to heaven.

However, sin gets in the way between God and us. God requires holiness and we produce sin instead. By doing so much of what the Law of God forbids and by failing to do so much of what the Law of God demands, we have separated ourselves from Him. Since God requires holiness from us it soon becomes evident that we are unable to make ourselves right with Him on our own. Jesus came to take away our sin by suffering and dying as a sacrifice for that sin on the cross. God forgives our sins for Jesus' sake and raises Him from the dead to indicate that.

But does that excite us? Do we celebrate that? Or, do we simply say, “Praise Jesus for dying on the cross and rising again!” and “Yay for Martin Luther for starting the Reformation!” and then become totally bored with the whole subject? Are we bored with forgiveness? Do we take God’s grace for granted? Our text for today helps us understand why this is no boring subject and why Reformation Day is worthy of celebration.

In our text for today, Jesus is speaking with Jews who believed in Him. These people evidently thought that simply acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and Lord made them right with God. Coming to faith was a one-time event. Believing in Jesus was an activity of the mind and being Jesus’ disciple was an act of the will. This was something they all thought they could handle.

However, when Jesus spoke of remaining His disciple by abiding in His Word, He said, by doing so, that they would know the truth and the truth would set them free. To this, the Jews responded with indignation, claiming they had never been slaves to anyone ever and therefore didn’t need to be freed. (Evidently, they were ignoring the Roman soldiers standing around who served as agents for the Empire which was now enslaving them and had forgotten about their nations 400 year sojourn as slaves in Egypt).

However, Jesus was not speaking of any military or political enslavement here. He was talking about a far greater and more dangerous enslavement, an enslavement which affected all people of all times and in all locations. When the Jewish converts indignantly replied, “How is it that you say, “You will become free”?”, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

It is likely that the ordinary Jewish citizen of the day felt the burden of the Law. The religious leaders of that time had meticulously divided up the Law of God into 613 separate commandments, all of which had to be obeyed in order to be blessed by God and insure participation in the resurrection of the just on the last day. They likely felt like slaves to a very cruel master.

By the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, the Church had enslaved the people of God in a similar way. They, too, were terrified over their sin and the possibility of spending eternity in hell or, at least, an extended period of time in purgatory. The people in that day were burdened down not only with sin but by an intricate plan for getting rid of the sin through good works, prayers, penance, and other duties which they would have to do for themselves and by themselves. They felt the burden of slavery to sin, but they could never quite taste the freedom – until Martin Luther came.

Luther found forgiveness and freedom, and because of it, joy, peace and eternal life in the Word of God and not in the teaching of the Church of the day. He found that Jesus’ death on the cross freely and fully forgives the sins of all people in all times and in all places. This forgiveness is a result of God’s grace – His undeserved love – and not because of anything that they have done. This forgiveness is received by faith – trust in God’s grace – which is also a free gift.

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead gains freedom from death and hell to all who have trusted in Him for forgiveness by His death. No longer do we have to fear death or hell. Both have been conquered by Jesus death and His resurrection. The Word of God promises this freedom from this slavery when it says, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

The people of Luther's time felt good when they were freed from sin and all of the stuff the church told them they had to do. However, Luther soon became frustrated because, rather than being strong faithful Christians who wanted to hear the Word of God, receive the sacraments, and serve Him, the people became lazy and thought that they didn't need to do anything because Jesus had already done everything. They became bored with grace and salvation and attendance at worship and the Lord's Supper declined. It was no biggie anymore. They had forgotten the enslavement of sin. In doing so, they became enslaved once again.

People today often act in the same way. We used to feel terribly guilty about our sin like the people before the Reformation. We might lose sleep at night over something we had done or failed to do. We would desire to receive forgiveness somehow. Therefore, people faithfully worshiped, receive the Sacrament regularly, and heard the Word of God often for the forgiveness of their sin.

But, like people after the Reformation and the Jews who believed in Jesus in our text, we have become bored with God's grace. We are happy that our sins have been forgiven, but we think it's only a one-time thing. I got baptized. I got confirmed. I'm good to go with God.

The problem is our failure to realize the seriousness of our sin. It is more than simply a few naughty actions, wrong thoughts, or unkind words. We have a far greater and more serious problem than we think. Simply put, sin equals enslavement. A sinner equals a slave. You and I, in our original sinful state, were slaves of sin under Satan's control. Things never end up well for a slave. In addition to the burden of guilt and shame which sin lays upon us, our slavery to sin means that we will eventually die.

Like the Jews in our text for today, you might be indignant to be referred to as a slave. You feel that you are in control of your own life and that sin has no control over you. If you think that sin does not enslave you or control you, then stop sinning. It's like the addicted smoker who says that tobacco does not control him and he doesn't need to smoke. Some will say, "Quitting smoking is easy. I've done it in the hundred times." Smokers may think they are in control, but they are not. You may think you are free from sin and in control of your lives, but you are not.

When we enter this world, sin absolutely controls us. We cannot stop sinning. Indeed, we cannot help but sin. Our efforts to ignore the law of God, revise the Law of God, or redefine sin in an attempt to not feel like a slave does not free us from slavery but holds us ever tighter in its grasp. We cannot free ourselves from the slavery to sin because we cannot free ourselves from sin nor death which sin leads us. We are doomed.

Jesus' death on the cross does more than simply wipe away our sin, give us a theological or spiritual boost, or make us better people. Jesus' death on the cross frees us from slavery to sin. It sets us free from the condemnation of sin, the judgment against sin, and the ultimate wages for sin, namely, death, both physical and spiritual. Jesus compares it in our text with slavery as practiced in that day. He says, "The slave does not remain in the house forever;" Every slave will ultimately die in slavery. He has no power to change, improve, or do away with his situation. He is stuck. He has no hope, no rights, and no future. He will eventually lose his place in the house through sale or death.

However, Jesus says, "the Son remains [in the house] forever. So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." The Son in that house has every right, a bright future, and remains in that house with that power and authority forever. The Son can choose to sell the slaves or even free them. He has the power and control. Jesus has paid the full price for each of you as slaves by His death on the cross. He has chosen to free you from slavery to sin,

slavery to death, and slavery to hell by overcoming sin, experiencing death, and enduring hell before rising from the dead. Therefore, you are free, free indeed.

Do not regard sin lightly, as if it is no big deal. It truly is slavery. Do not therefore take your freedom for granted. It is not a single event which happened years ago, but is a state of being which continues forever. See your freedom as the greatest gift that God has given and continues to give to you.

When people become free, they celebrate. Every year on July 4, we celebrate our independence as a nation and as individuals. We march in parades, shoot off fireworks, and rejoice with family members in cookouts.

We celebrate our freedom from slavery to sin here in this place every Sunday around the Word of God. For it is the Word of God which shows us the truth about our place before God. It shows us the truth of sin and not the lie of our society which denies sin or redefine sin. It shows us the truth of God's salvation in the perfect life, the sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ and not the lie of saving ourselves by our good works. It shows us the truth of the hope for everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ, not the false hope of longer life through medicine, technology, and other efforts of man. This truth sets us free, keeps us free and brings us to perfect freedom in heaven with Him.

Therefore, live as a freed person. This may be difficult since we are so accustomed to being slaves to sin. In the movie, "Shawshank Redemption", a story about life in prison, one prisoner, after spending almost all of his life in jail, was released on bail. So used to regimented life in prison, this man could not handle freedom and eventually committed suicide. In the same way, people who are not used to living in the freedom which the Word of God gives us, may use their freedom as a excuse to sin. Do not let that happen to you.

Be reminded of your slavery to sin in confession at Divine Service, as well as in personal Bible reading and corporate Bible study. This will help you not fall into further slavery or ignore that slavery altogether. Receive that freedom anew through the Absolution and Preaching which tell you that you are free. Eat the Meal of Freedom with other freed slaves here as we rejoice in the freedom we have through the body and blood of Jesus Christ, which we receive in our hands and our mouths. Live free from guilt, free from fear, free from the threat of enslavement. Live free lives and do not let yourselves become enslaved, deliberately or unintentionally.

You have been set free from sin and all of its consequences – death, the devil, and hell. This freedom is exciting and life-changing and should never be taken for granted or forgotten. It is freedom to be celebrated, not only on Reformation Day, but every day of our lives. It is freedom that is to be lived out, not only in church on special days, but in your communities, your families, your very life. Remember Jesus' words spoken to Jews who believed, people at the time of the Reformation, and to us today – to all people enslaved in sin and in fear of death – "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." Hear His Word! Continue as His disciples! Know the truth! Be free! Amen.