

Freedom

October 25, 2015 – Reformation Day

First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Freedom. If ever there were a buzzword in our American society, I would say “freedom” would certainly qualify. When we fought for our independence, we were fighting for freedom from tyranny. We declared ourselves to be the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” We enshrined certain freedoms into our United States Constitution. We hear “The Battle Cry of Freedom” and sing, “From every mountainside, let freedom ring.” Freedom was the rallying cry for liberation from slavery and for civil rights. We’ve fought wars to protect our freedom. Our highest civilian award in this country is the Presidential Medal of Freedom. More recently we’ve seen “freedom fries” and the “Freedom Caucus” and hear political candidates lament their perceived threats to our freedom. But, if there’s one thing we collectively know as Americans, it’s that we’re free.

So when Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel “the truth will make you free,” we may not get what he means. Like Jesus’ audience in the reading, we may not understand why Jesus needs to promise us our freedom. “We are decedents of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone,” they said. Except when the Judeans say that they have never been slaves, it’s ridiculous. It’s just factually wrong. The descendants of Abraham were slaves in Egypt for more than four hundred years. Later, the Israelites were taken captive in Babylon for nearly 70 years. As they were speaking, these very people were living under Roman occupation and oppression. Their claim that they have never been slaves is patently absurd.

But is it any less absurd to say that we are free? We can cling to our political freedom, but that's really not what Jesus means when he says we can be made free. He's talking about something different. Listen again. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."

Wow. This is a radical truth for us to hear. And if we're honest with ourselves, we probably don't like it any more than Jesus' original audience did. It's uncomfortable to think of ourselves as sinners. There are many, myself included, who sometimes feel uneasy about even starting each worship service with the order of confession and forgiveness. It's really not the most uplifting start to a day. "Good morning, nice to see you, oh by the way, I am a sinner." It's sometimes hard for us to even talk about sin, especially if you identify as a more progressive Christian, as I do. So often when we hear about sins, it's about breaking a rule or doing something considered "immoral." It's about creating an "in" and an "out" camp. An "us versus them" type thing. We try to do our best and maybe even believe that we haven't committed any sins. But if we understand sin to be not so much about individual wrongdoings but rather a brokenness of relationships, our bondage becomes much clearer. The times when I put my self-interests before those of my neighbors. When I make choices of convenience or pleasure that harm the environment. When I buy clothes made in sweatshops and sold at stores that mistreat their employees. When I can't trust in God's vision of loving relationships between all people and fall back into my fears and prejudices. Looking at those realities, I can understand what Jesus means when he says that I am a slave to sin. This binding and suffocating sin is woven into our very humanity while still giving us the illusion of freedom. And as St. Paul tells us in today's second reading, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And that's the

radical reality of sin. Every single person is a sinner. The rich and the poor, the old and the young, the pious and the atheist, there is no distinction. Every one.

And one of the most insidious parts of our captivity is that it makes us believe that we can free ourselves from our sin. That if we do enough good works or say the right number of prayers we can repay our debts to God. But as the Apostle Paul tells us, no matter how much we may try to make up for our shortcomings, we can never free ourselves from our sin. No matter how closely we follow the law, we can never fulfill it on our own. We can never do enough.

But if that is the radical truth of our sinful nature, the truth of Christ's gospel is even more radical still. For as we heard during confession and forgiveness this morning, our sins have been forgiven! We have been raised up for a new life in Christ! In the midst of our sinful nature, God speaks to us and says, "I love you and I forgive you." Hear again to the Word of God spoken through the Prophet Jeremiah, "For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Not only does God forgive us, but God also chooses to forget our sin! It can no longer be counted against us. And as Paul said, we know that nothing we can do could ever merit such a free gift. No matter how hard we might try, we could never earn such forgiveness. But God sees us in our sin and by God's radical love forgives us and makes us free.

For those of us that grew up Lutheran, we have heard the story of Martin Luther at least once. So let me tell part of it again, because I'm not sure I could do any sort of justice to a Reformation Sunday sermon without talking about Luther at least a little bit. As you may remember from confirmation, Martin was a monk and spent his days in torment trying to be good enough to earn God's love. It's said that after spending hours in confession he would rush back because he remembered more sins he had committed. At least once, he spent six hours confessing. Luther's confessor and friend, Johannes von Staupitz, then told him he didn't

understand how he could have so many sins to confess if all of his time was spent in confession! Well, to make a long story short, through his study of scripture, especially Romans, Luther realized that nothing he could do would merit him God's love. Not becoming a monk, not confessing his sins, and not doing any number of good works. Rather he realized that God's love is a free gift accessible to all people through faith regardless of merit. As he came to understand this radical gift, Luther felt freedom for the first time.

As we near the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, celebrations like today may seem increasingly to be steeped in the past – a relic that we still hang on to but don't really need anymore – something passé. Or we may see Reformation Sunday as a chance for us to be proud of being Lutherans, some sort of triumphalism because we were born into the “right” church. We might boast of ourselves and say, “We're the heirs of Martin Luther and have never been slaves to anyone!” But then we hear again Jesus' words in John's gospel, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,” and realize that this reality is still true today. This isn't just something that happened 2000 years ago or even 500 years ago, but is still happening today. We are sinners and we still need God's love and forgiveness. We are the ones Jesus came to save. We still need the gospel that we hear today, that though we have been in bondage to sin, our God who loves us forgives our iniquities and remembers our sins no more. That though we were captive, we have been made free by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Here. Today. Now.

Now, what do we do with our freedom? Luther would say that we should use our freedom to do good works for our neighbors. Rather than trying to earn God's love through our works, we have been freed to serve each other in love and thanksgiving. We can serve the poor, spread the gospel, advocate for justice, and fight against inequality and hate. We can grow food for the St. Peter Food Shelf and visit the sick and homebound and fight against climate change

and welcome the outcast. Not because we want to be better in the eyes of God, but because God has freed and loved us and we now want to show that love to the world.

This week, I asked people on Facebook what freedom meant to them. I didn't get too many responses and one of them was "freedom is when your sermon is written," which I understand, but wasn't quite what I was looking for. But one of my friends posted a song called "Freedom" from the 1974 musical, "Shenandoah." Maybe some of you know it. I had never heard it before, but now it's stuck in my mind. It starts, "Freedom ain't a state like Maine or Virginia / Freedom ain't across some county line / Freedom is a flame that burns within ya / Freedom's in the state of mind." Our freedom doesn't come from a country or a document or our ancestors, our freedom comes from the understanding that God loves us in spite of our sin and has chosen to forgive us as a free gift. And we can then use our free state of mind to lovingly serve those around us, not out of obligation, but in thanksgiving for our freedom in Christ Jesus.

This is most certainly true.