

Sermon Draft

Text: John 8:31–36

Sermon: Reformation 2018

John 8:31-36 is the assigned Gospel for Reformation Day. There are always a danger when we Lutherans observe the Reformation of the Church in the sixteenth century. The first danger is a sort of historical pride or even arrogance, as though our blessed life as heirs of the Reformation Gospel is our own accomplishment or possession. A second danger is to think that this festival consists of remembering in a historical sense.

One thinks of the phrase *semper reformanda*, “always reforming.” Different people use this phrase in different ways. Some of those ways are destructive. For instance, some think that the truth of God is an ever-unfolding truth, and so our views need to be constantly changing; the slogan “Don’t put a period where God has put a comma” is used to support various radical changes in our understanding of truth and morality. This is an obviously dangerous way to understand the phrase.

For us the phrase *semper reformanda* is an invitation for self-examination, as individuals and as a congregation. There will always be a need for the living God to chip away arrogance and misunderstanding and unbelief in us and not just in others. The unchanging Gospel is just that—unchanging. But as the world changes around us, there will be new ways to grasp and rejoice in the eternally true promises of God in Christ. Our hearts and our lives will always require God’s restoration and reformation until the day when we have been raised from the dead and completely transformed into the image of Christ Jesus.

The sermon, today, will be like any other sermon. It will seek to bring the powerful message of a biblical text to bear on a particular group of people and their lives of faith and love. Our prayer is that God will be gracious and make the festival of the Reformation an occasion to grasp firmly the Gospel and to be grasped firmly by our loving God, to our blessing and for his purposes.

The Reformation wasn't and isn't about dividing the Church. Luther never wanted to start a new denomination. He wanted to bring the church together around God's Word of Truth. But as we know from history sinful human beings have used the events of the Reformation to divide us. Sadly, that is happening within the church still today. Look at any church family and you have groups of people that like to gossip and divide the church instead of building it up as well as building up one another. Small groups are fine but when they forget they are part of the church family they do harm. I encourage us all to remember the Eight Commandment: **You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.** What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way. Enough about that I just ask you to remember words do have consequences. Luther wrote words on a piece of paper and look what God did! Our words can be positive and build up or they can be negative and tear down.

There's more than one way to think about the festival of the Reformation. Last year we had a big celebration on the 500th anniversary. Lutherans especially may make it a day when we boldly confess the Gospel, or a day to be especially thankful for God's gifts in Christ. There's obviously more than a few ways to observe the day.

We're all familiar with the phrase ***“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”*** from Psalm 52:15. And we should open our mouths to share the Gospel but our text from John 8 is an invitation not to open our lips, but to open our ears. To listen to Jesus and his Word and to be set free. That's our theme for today: Listen to Jesus and be set free.

All people need to be set free from slavery. Jesus' listeners didn't understand; they didn't think they had ever been enslaved. Today too we don't think of ourselves as being enslaved. But listen to what Jesus says in this chapter: ***“I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins”*** (v 24).
“Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (v 34).

Only the Son can set you free. They didn't believe in Jesus—and so they were enslaved.

At first, Luther didn't understand either. He knew that he was trapped. But he thought it was the fact that he was sinful that was causing his slavery. He could never find freedom from that. And in a way, no one, Christian or non-Christian, ever can.

We remain sinful even today. Does that mean that Christ has not set us free?

May I suggest: Luther thought his slavery was caused by his sins. But it was really something else. His slavery was caused by the fact that he couldn't hear the voice of Jesus and believe in him.

Today, the same mistake might happen. The world, of course, usually doesn't admit that it is enslaved. Even we Christians, God's own dear children, can find ourselves living and acting as though we were still in chains—not free to be for God or for others what he has set us free to be.

What's going on? What is the slavery? It is a slavery of the ears. It is caused by listening—to the wrong voices, to the wrong message. The Jews in Jesus' day were listening to anything, anything other than Jesus' own words. ***“Remain in my word,”*** he said, but they would have none of it.

What was Luther listening to? Perhaps for years he was listening to the scream of his own voice, his own fears.

The promise for me and for you becomes this: Christ's Word can set us free from slavery to other voices so that we can listen to him. Listen to Jesus, and be set free because we believe in him.

Jesus wants to talk to us about himself. One question dominates John 8: ***“Who is Jesus?”*** In verse 25, they ask, ***“Who are you?”*** In verse 58, Jesus says, ***“Before Abraham was, I am he.” “I am the answer, I am the truth. You need to listen to me.”*** Say it this way; Jesus is the perfect Son of the Father. From eternity, yes, and true God just as the Nicene Creed says. But the eternal Word became flesh, a man—the Son of God.

In that sense, although we are all adopted, there is only one Son. Only Jesus.

As the only and perfect Son, Jesus obeys his Father. He carries out the Father's will as no one else ever had, and as no one else could. He completes the work: "It is finished." *He* dies—in our sins. He was trapped in and enslaved in a rock-hewn tomb. He gave himself into the silence and the slavery of death—for each of us. On Easter, that slavery was broken!

As he had said to the disciples, he was gone "*for a little while.*" But then he showed himself to be the resurrection and the life. He laid down his life, in order to take it up again!

This Son LIVES. The Vine was cut down, but now he lives, and he is full of life. He says, "*This is who I am. Remain in me. Listen to me. Be set free from your fear, from your unbelief.*"

Listen to the voice of Jesus—and be set free. In Jerusalem long ago, they wouldn't listen. They stopped their ears.

For Luther long ago, God enabled him to open his ears to the voice of Jesus that overcame the accusations of Luther's own conscience.

For you and me, right here, right now on this Reformation Day: Listen to Jesus' voice, and be set free from slavery to sin.

Jesus says, "Yes, your sin is very great. But I am the perfect Son of God, and I am greater than your sin. You will not die in your sins; I did already, for you. You are mine. You are mine."

Jesus says, "You've been listening to other voices that say that you are in control. Other voices say that you need to pursue that sin, that purpose that flows from your own desires. Stop listening to them! They are leading you to slavery."

Jesus says, "You belong to me now—to me. I will protect you. Your meaning comes from me. You're free now, to serve me. It's what I made you to do. This is true freedom."

Jesus says, "You are my disciples. Listen to me. Remain in my Word. Be set free."

One definition of hell I've heard described it as "the kingdom of noise." If that's appropriate, one of the things that it means is that in hell, you can't hear the voice of Jesus.

On this Reformation Day let our prayer be: "Oh, Lord, open thou my ears." Jesus' Word can free us from slavery to unbelief; we will find our salvation in him, and in him alone. Jesus' Word can free us from the slavery of wasted lives. He can teach us to follow him. Listen to Jesus . . . and be set free.

Amen