

Sermon Draft

Text: John 8:31–36

Sermon: Reformation 2021

Reformation Sunday is an occasion for the Church to celebrate with the reformer Martin Luther her possession of the one, true, never-changing Gospel message. Luther’s “discovery” is shared by us all and not confined to only a specific region or group of people. Thus, Reformation Sunday provides a setting where the scriptural and theological truths of the Gospel, of sinning daily and of receiving forgiveness by the grace of God through faith because of Christ, are brought to the attention of the worshiper. The freedom we have is the release from the slavery of our own sin and to be transformed to a new life in Christ.

Luther’s true intention was to speak as a Doctor of Theology in and on behalf of the church, so that the church might return to its true catholic faith. Thus, Reformation Day has an ecumenical and catholic focus that speaks on behalf of the Gospel, which, according to the First Reading (Revelation 14:6–7), is a gospel that is eternal and that must be proclaimed universally to all people who dwell on earth.

In the face of the coming judgment, the one to be worshiped is the one who also comes as our Savior and provides salvation his way and not ours.

The Epistle (Romans 3:19–28) is the Magna Carta of the Lutheran faith. It fleshes out the content of the Gospel (John 8:31–36) in greater detail. Since all are sinners with no exception, the Law holds all people accountable, and thus all are justified not by works of the Law but by faith in Jesus Christ. Christ is our expiation, his bloody sacrifice is our redemption, and his righteousness is received as a gracious gift. It is a key text highlighting for Lutherans the distinctive aspects of what is the Gospel, and because of that content, it is treasured in the Lutheran Church as one of the key biblical texts next to Ephesians 2:8–9. ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”***

The theme of freedom is central to the apostle Paul, whereas here in the Gospel of John it occurs only once, and that is in our text. What kind of a freedom is Jesus talking about?

Looking around the world and into the lives of humans, the desire and quest for freedom applies to all facets of life: to be released from prison; to live no longer in abject conditions; to be freed from the pressures at work; to escape illnesses, addiction, political or racial oppression, imperial and colonial domination.

Many individuals in the history of mankind who fought for freedom have become film heroes. For example, William Tell is the folk hero of Switzerland who fought the Austrian Hapsburg House. William Wallace led the Scots in the First War of Scottish Independence against King Edward I of England.

But the freedom Jesus talks about in our text is the freedom that characterizes his true disciples. True disciples of Jesus Christ are those who are indeed free.

In many ways, the desire and struggles for freedom, whether in one's personal life or in a broader social and political setting, are all related to our common human condition that we humans are caught up in the reality of sin and that we have to struggle with its manifold symptoms.

The deeper manifestation of such symptoms is, of course, the disease itself that has seized the life of every human being, and which continues to remain with us till our life's end.

Here and now we still struggle with the desire to sin, and its full force remains alive. We would like to not have sin as part of our lives, but, as Paul realizes for himself in Romans 7, it remains a constant force even for him who was baptized. We have to speak of this human reality and the struggles with sin for us who live as Christians. We remember, for example, Luther's personal struggle to master sin, only that he would find himself entrapped by it. Sin is not merely an occasional misconduct, we still fail to daily in thought, word and deed.

What we learn about ourselves is that we are humans endowed with a will. This means that we have an obligation to act in certain ways, that is, to live according to the Lord's will. We are not a piece of wood floating aimlessly in water. Instead, we are conscious beings, free to act and choose. In that regard, we are free, but at the same time, with that freedom comes responsibility.

If we were robots or like the floating wood, we would not be responsible and accountable for our conduct. Though we would like to think of ourselves as beings who are in control of our moral decisions, we are aware of the deeper problem: we commit sin, and we are slaves to sin. And enslavement is more than an occasional moral derailment. The deeper issue is the failed relationship with God, where we do not love, fear, and obey him as we should (First Commandment).

Yes, in Christ Jesus we have found freedom. The Son has set us free (v 36) from sin's condemnation through our Baptism. He is the one who is truly free (v 35), and he continually sets us free through his free forgiveness and enables us by his Spirit to serve him and our fellow neighbor. As Christians, we live in that God-given freedom in spite of sin's power!

Many in society aspire to a freedom that knows no limits. A person might think he or she has reached true freedom once outside a relationship with God. He thinks he's no longer bound to anyone but himself. She can do and choose as she pleases. But the Lord says, "You are not free; you are held captive. There is no free existence."

To use a description from John's Gospel, we are either bound to the things from below or to things from above. To fall out of the relationship with God means to find oneself on the other side bound to things below. Even if someone believes himself to be free from God and chooses a moral, responsible life, he finds himself on the other side, separated from God, and his works remain sinful. He is captive to the outside power of sin (Romans 6:16–18). We have been given true freedom, but only by being with Christ.

How does this freedom come to us? How does one become a true disciple who experiences this kind of freedom the Lord speaks about? It begins by knowing and understanding what it is, this God-given freedom. It certainly is not a freedom of relying on oneself or divorcing oneself from the relationship with God. That may seem like freedom, but, ironically, it is an enslaved freedom and sinful. We are truly free when we live a life with God, as it was meant to be since the creation of Adam and Eve. Therefore, someone who is truly free is the one who understands or knows what freedom is to be made free by the Son and find in him freedom (v 36). This truth will set you free.

As heard, ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”***

Being set free and being conscious of it makes one a true disciple. In that freedom, we are told to love God above all things. No longer must we love him. Now because of the freedom we have in Christ we do so willingly and joyously because the Holy Spirit awakens us, draws us, and makes us alive.

Christ wants his disciples, us to know where they can find their freedom. It is through the Word that all we’ve heard happens. We must stay with the Word, which brings us that freedom and sustains us in it. Not only do we live in that freedom, and not only do we know it, but we also find it through the power of God’s Word. The Greek word translated “remain” means that we should dwell in it, right next to it, and never abandon it.

Discipleship is more than going to church to attend worship or participating in group events or in a Bible study. Discipleship is staying in Christ’s Word and Sacraments and wanting to receive freedom as forgiveness. Abiding in his Word is more than studying or learning about it.

Through it, Christ speaks to us, forgives us, and guides us. He began our relationship, and now he wants to remain in personal contact with us through his Word, by us practicing and nurturing our relationship with him through it.

In the past, we began a new life in truth and in freedom, and now God continues to give freedom as a gift. Reformation Sunday is the occasion to discover anew that our future has begun with the gift of freedom in Christ's Word.

“No strength of ours can match his might.” That is how the second stanza of the Reformation hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (LSB 657) begins. In these words, we find the insight that Martin Luther discovered once upon a time in Wittenberg. We affirm these truths today with him. My own efforts do not bring me any closer to the goal of being with God. I cannot earn my relationship with him on my own nor can I buy it. It is given to me as a gift freely, that is, “by grace alone” (*sola gratia*), heard through his Word (*solo verbo*), and received in faith (*sola fide*). These phrases are not empty and antiquated, but rather bring us the wonderful news of my freedom won for me by Christ. The righteous shall live by faith alone and not by works.

My constant striving, always wanting to be an achiever, and this selfish focus on myself all come to an end. The grace of God lifts me up, and through his Word, I remain lifted up.

Amen