

2024 Reformation Day: Freedom

What do we celebrate on reformation day? A division, a rebellion? No. Dividing the body of Christ is never good and we ought pray for its unity and reconciliation. So what do we celebrate? We celebrate that God's Word, so long shrouded by un-scriptural teaching and false doctrine, is brought out into the light and to the people. We celebrate that Christ's cross stands preeminent in front of God's people once more, along with the fullness of His work to save sinners, of which we are the foremost. This then is our hope, our confidence, and our freedom – the world can do whatever it wants to us, we have salvation in Christ alone. We are free of their machinations. We will be just fine. Amen.

This is how Jesus invites us today to think about freedom.

We have a lot of opinions on freedom, it's something we take a lot of pride in, here in America. Especially you red-blooded Idahoans.

From the constitution and throwing off of the monarchy, to underground railroads and emancipation proclamations, to suffrage, to civil rights, freedom is something we desire and long for. Something we view as worth fighting for.

And so we have these mechanisms we've used to cast off the chains, sometimes literally, of slavery and oppression – we have sit-ins, boycotts, protests, marches, we have laws and bills, and amendments, and, as mentioned constitutions, and let us not forget – wars. To bring about freedom.

And yet, do we have this freedom thing all figured out yet? Here in the election year as the toxicity goes on, "they're a fascist," "no they are!" Both sides certainly want you to worry that your freedom is at stake – you might lose it! And the freedom we do have, we still struggle with.

Where is the line in the sand where freedom for the individual doesn't encroach on the freedom of others? We lived that struggle in an all-too-real way a couple years ago. Forgive me for reminding you. But I bring it up because I think it goes to show we don't have it all figured out yet, or to put it another way: we still aren't perfectly free.

There are obligations, commitments, responsibilities, financial and health burdens that constrain our freedom. I am not free to leave my family, I am not free to take a Lamborghini off the lot, I am not free from the laws of gravity.

And don't mishear me. This sermon is NOT a call for another constitution, or a better path politically, or for anarchy or any such thing. It is a call for us to realize that with all our mechanisms to try and cast-off slavery and oppression – perhaps our mechanisms, no matter what new things we try, or old things we try again, maybe none of them can ever win us perfect freedom?

Nor is this a sermon that says we should stop trying those things. No, when there is injustice, the scriptures are clear – let's be a people who try to do something about it! But I think we can still be that people of action while also recognizing that our efforts and our mechanisms will not accomplish this perfectly.

The reformation is perhaps an example of this. A document is signed by the princes of Germany, the Augsburg Confession, "this is what we believe if you don't like it cut our heads off." And, by the grace of God, the emperor doesn't! They are free to worship in their lands! Freedom!

Until Luther dies and a war starts. Until another generation comes, intending to "finish Luther's work" and their reformations go past the bounds of scripture. The point: there is freedom found

in the reformation that is worth celebrating, as we do today, but we see once more that our mechanisms will never achieve perfection in that regard.

And so Jesus invites us to think of freedom in this way: “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” He invites us to look to another mechanism to set us free. Himself.

And we might respond, “We are offspring of America – and we haven’t been enslaved to anyone, we are the freest people in the world!” But, if you buy any of my philosophizing on freedom that I just made you endure... well, how free are we? And even if you think our freedom is so great... Jesus still invites us to set that aside. Just as Jesus ignores the fact that the people talking to him in our text are literally under Roman Occupation but somehow still think they are so free.

We set that aside because Jesus tells them, and us, what we are all slaves to: sin.

And this seems trite, it seems like philosophizing. I thought, “how can I say this theologizing – ‘slaves to sin,’ is on the same level as the chattel slavery from the south where people were whipped and beaten and abused their whole lives?”

But then I realized something – you know what all those horrors of slavery that happened (and still happen by the way) here or anywhere else around the world are? They are Sin. They are wrong. They are a brokenness, an evil. Which means that this lesson Jesus teaches us today does matter. It matters for the persecuted, the kidnapped, the enslaved, and for people like us with so much to be thankful for.

Because all brokenness we experience comes from this disease, that we all have, sin.

By what mechanism can we be set free from it – a protest? A war? No. And yet we wonder, “well maybe we can conquer sin by winning the wars within ourselves!” I might ask: How is that going for you? Are you winning them all?

Luther tried to win them all. He failed, miserably. He was depressed and convinced that God would punish him, would call him to account one day, and he wouldn't be able to stand. And so he tried to invoke the saints, “give me some of your righteousness St. Anne!” But he knew he was no more righteous after such a prayer. He spent hours in the confessional booth trying to speak his sins out of himself, but there were always more – always! An endless stream. He tried to pay money, that someone might write a paper saying he was pure – those made him feel worse. He tried all those mechanisms but he knew he was still a sinner. A prisoner. On death row.

And so our text on reformation Sunday is: “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

The Son. Jesus. He is the One who is not mastered by sin, not at all. He lives the perfect life we can't. And yet he is taken prisoner. He is stuck in a cell. Stripped of his freedoms by corrupt rulers. And goes to the cross, undeserved, that we might receive, undeserved, the effects of the payment of his priceless blood: full forgiveness and freedom from the eternal consequences of sin.

That... is freedom! The freedom Jesus gives you is literally the bailiff opening the jail cell and letting you walk out. Go. Romans 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.” No fines will come your way. No bills. No one chasing you down. The debt is paid in full. The verdict is in – Jesus was guilty, he became sin, so you might be innocent – washed clean. There is nothing left but to go and live - and live you shall, eternally!

But we think, “no, it can’t be applied to me! Look it says, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ And I have not kept his word as I ought to have...”

Ok, so go look at it again and what does it say? It says Ephesians 2:8-9 We are saved by grace through faith, not by works.” It says, John 3:16 “Whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.” It says, “This is the work of God to believe in the One he has sent.” John 6:29. And I could go on. Brothers and sisters, That’s the truth! Let it set you free! Get out of your own head that is judging your motives and feelings. Spoiler alert, your motives aren’t perfectly pure, and your feelings aren’t perfectly sincere. But what does that change if Christ is yours and you are His? He has set you free.

And we might protest, “But look at all this sin in my life!” Sure. It’s there, yes. Just like the scars on the backs of the slaves on the underground railroad. They probably hurt too, maybe even for the rest of their lives. But it doesn’t change that they were free.

You are too. Because the verdict has come down from God. Who is anyone to overrule the verdict of the Gospel that is given to God’s people of faith? No council, no pope, and certainly not you, can overrule that verdict, trust me, we aren’t that strong.

And one day he will see you to a place where sin, and its effects, are gone for good. And this brings us back around to the beginning. Is a system, is a politician, are our works, or some saint, or money going to set this world free? No. Because all of those are spoiled by sin and lead to corruption, greed, pride, and pain. This doesn’t mean we stop trying, we are not ignorant of God’s Word which has things for us to be about. We are simply rejoicing in the truth that our ability to carry them out doesn’t determine God’s love or saving work in our lives.

No his love and saving work is shown on a cross and an empty tomb. There is freedom. Freedom for the slave in the south who never made it to the underground railroad. Freedom to the girl right now being trafficked. Freedom because the world and its brokenness is so dark, it's unimaginable. He has overcome that darkness. He will see his people through it.

We are his people, by grace, by his Calling, by the waters that drown out a stream of sin. May we be a people who let the light of God's Word shine. May we never put forward some mechanism that doesn't lead to forgiveness and life that adds burdens on already hurting people. No, instead, may we clear aside anything that shrouds the cross. And may we dwell there, may its truth set us free. The same truth that made apostles and martyrs brave to face chains and death – the world can do its worst. We have life in Jesus' name. We are free. God be praised. Amen.