

Freedom Indeed

Text: John 8:31–36

Other Lessons: Revelation 14:6–7; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19–28

Sermon Theme: True disciples of Jesus Christ are those who are indeed free.

Sermon Goal: That hearers, on this annual celebration of the Reformation, would once again find in Scripture what they have come to know in faith—that they are truly free to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Sermon

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. Reformation Sunday should provide 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 worshipers. The freedom they have is the release from the slavery of their 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(*universal*) faith. So, Reformation Day has an ecumenical and catholic focus that speaks on behalf of the Gospel, which, according to the *First Reading* (Rev 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* (Rom 3:19–28) is the foundation of the Lutheran faith. It fleshes out the content of the *Gospel* (Jn 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 atonement, 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 (Eph 2:8–9) *And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

On October 31, 1517, on the eve of All Saints’ Day, the young professor of theology Dr. Martin Luther sent a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz in which he expressed his theological and pastoral concerns over the indulgence system: “Evidently,” he complains, “the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters they are then assured of their salvation. . . . O great God! The souls committed to your care, excellent Father, are thus directed to death. . . . Therefore I can no longer be silent on this subject. . . . What a horror, what a danger for a bishop to permit the loud noise of indulgences among his people, while the gospel is silenced” (AE 48:46–47).

Luther appended to his letter the Ninety-Five Theses in the hope that they would be disputed among his colleagues and other theologians in the church. The traditional way of making the theses publicly known in Wittenberg was to post them on the castle church’s doors, which Luther did that same day. Knowledge of the theses spread quickly, and soon Christians were reflecting on the basic foundation of the church’s faith as expressed in Thesis 1: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (AE 31:25). Using Scripture as their basis, the theses support a doctrine of penance that focuses solely on the contrition of sins and their absolution by the grace of God. Any other means to acquire absolution, either through the purchase of a letter of indulgence or by one’s own merits, goes against Christ’s atoning work. Salvation is solely “for Christ’s sake, through faith” (AC IV 2), who died as a sacrifice “not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of mankind” (AC III 3).

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. Rather, the Spirit of truth abides in them (14:17) and bears much fruit through them (15:4-16). (Notice the explicit connection between abiding, bearing fruit, and being a disciple in 15:7-8.) We get the idea that abiding in Jesus involves more than mere belief. Abiding involves a new kind of existence, a whole new life. Jesus calls it discipleship.

True Disciples of Jesus Christ Are Those Who Are Indeed Free.

I.

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 think of sin no longer ruling 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. (*Here perhaps insert examples from Luther's life.*) Sin is not merely an occasional misconduct, but, rather, behind every sinful act lies a desire to sin called "*the tendency of humans to sin*" that holds us captive even after Baptism (see AC II 1–3). Though the Formula of Concord (Article 2) speaks specifically on natural man's spiritual state as being completely dead—even more, as actively resisting God—we cannot look at ourselves as the baptized who are completely free from the powers of sin. We still fail to comply perfectly with the moral righteousness (the second kind of righteousness) after having received passively the righteousness of Christ (the first kind of righteousness) and the freedom from sin's condemnation.

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 a 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. They think they're no longer bound to anyone but themselves. They can do and choose as they please. 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 themselves to be free from God and chooses a moral, responsible life, they find themselves on the other side, separated from God, and their works remain sinful. They are captive to the outside power of sin (Rom 6:16–18). We have been given true freedom, but only by being with Christ.

Freedom is not the end of our journey, but the beginning. Jesus sets us free for a reason – so that we can live freely as his followers. Just as the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt in order to live as God's chosen people, we are freed from slavery to sin in order to live as God's freed and chosen people. We have been freed for this reason. We have been called into the freedom of the gospel to live out the call of Jesus.

II.

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. Only in God do we find everything we need for our spiritual welfare and what we must know about who we are: that he has created us, that he has chosen us before our birth, and that, through Baptism, he has made us his children and lets us live under his grace. 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.

This means that the righteousness we are required to demonstrate becomes a gifted righteousness as forgiveness of our sins. God is merciful because Christ has given himself for us and through him the knowledge of true freedom is received and understood (Eph 4:22–24; Rom 12:2). 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. We can do so willingly and joyously because the Holy Spirit awakens us, draws us, and makes us alive. It is true that John does not speak of our justification in the same choice of words as the apostle Paul (e.g., in Rom 3:21–28). But freedom is nothing else than the gift which is received through the absolution of our sins.

III.

Christ wants his disciples to know where they can find their freedom. It is in his words. It is through the Word that all we've said 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.

"With might of ours can naught be done, Soon were our loss effected." That is how the second stanza of the Reformation hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (*LSB* 656) 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 scriptura*), 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.

REFORMATION DAY, OCTOBER 31, 2021

Two Religions

Text: Romans 3:19–28

Visual: picture of someone doing work; picture of someone holding a gift

Summary: There are only two religions in the world: of works and of grace (gift). Christianity is the only religion of grace.

When you ride in the car with your parents to church each Sunday, what do you see on the way? *Receive responses.* You know what, I bet you probably pass lots of churches on the way too. Maybe

you even pass other places of worship, like a synagogue or a mosque, or another kind of temple. Those are places where people who don't yet know Jesus might gather.

Sometimes it seems as if there are many different ideas out there that people can believe. But you know what? There are actually just two ideas. Two! People can either believe they're saved by works (*show picture of person doing work*) or that they're saved by gift (*show picture of someone holding a gift*).

In the first picture, the person needs to make sure she (or he) does all the right work, keeps the Law perfectly, is careful not to make mistakes. She believes she needs to do enough good works so that God will be happy with her and will save her. Does it sound as if that might be pretty hard? *Receive responses.* In the second picture, the person is given the gift of faith to believe in Jesus. For her (or him), being forgiven for her sins and being saved by God is a gift! She doesn't have to work hard to earn it, just like you don't have to do work to earn a gift for your birthday.

Christians, you and I, are the only ones in the world who believe faith and salvation are a gift, and we believe that because it's what the Bible teaches. Here's what God says in Romans: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. . . . For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:20, 23–24).

So God says that our works don't save us. Only Jesus can earn our salvation, and he did—on the cross! It was a gift to us, just from him. There is no work that you need to do for God to love you and keep you in his arms forever. You are a precious gift to him, and so he gave you the gift of faith to believe in him. You received that gift at your Baptism, and you continue to receive it every time you hear his Word!

Let's pray. Dear Jesus, thank you for doing the hard work of dying on the cross for me. I'm so glad that I have the gift of faith that you freely gave to me. In your name we pray. Amen.