

Reformation Sunday
 October 29, 2017
 John 8:31-36

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 Topeka Performing Arts Center – Topeka, Kansas

Dear fellow redeemed by the blood of Jesus, brothers and sisters in the household of faith sharing the bond of Baptism into Christ, fellow heirs of the Reformation and confessors of the faith according to the Lutheran Confessions: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ!

What a joy and memorable experience it is to be gathered with you, the LCMS congregations of Topeka, along with your guests, for this very special celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation!

Thank you to all who organized this service and worked so hard to bring it about. And thank you for inviting me to have the honor and privilege of proclaiming God's Word to you today.

I'm sure we all pretty much know what we're here to celebrate this morning: that 500 years ago, this Tuesday, on October 31st, 1517, a Roman Catholic monk and priest and doctor of theology and university professor—in the small, but up-and-coming town of Wittenberg, Germany—posted 95 theses for debate on the subject of *The Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, those pieces of paper that the Roman papacy had sold for years, and had recently begun to sell in Germany to finance the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome—pieces of paper that supposedly granted release from all temporal punishment for sin.

The 1st, and perhaps most famous of those 95 theses, is this:

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

But another of those theses, which simply and beautifully states one of the eventual main tenets of the Reformation, is the 62nd thesis, that:

“The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

And yet the posting of those 95 theses on October 31st wasn't the sum total of the Reformation—not by a long shot. Rather, that day was just the beginning of years, even decades of struggle to reclaim the Word of God as “the sole source and norm” for all Christian teaching, and to reclaim the Gospel of salvation by grace *alone*, through faith *alone* in Jesus Christ *alone*, as the center of God's revelation to us, and thus of the Church's ministry.

And so, for centuries—because of that Reformation emphasis on the Word of God and the Gospel—the faithful cloud of witnesses that has gone before us in the Lutheran Church has appointed today's reading from John chapter 8 as the Holy Gospel for the annual celebration of the Reformation—words of Jesus that speak of God's Word and truth and freedom over and against sin and slavery to sin:

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free... Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

It's especially about this FREEDOM that I'd like to speak today.

I. Freedom from what?

Freedom from what? Some of those Jews who were listening to Jesus when He first mentioned freedom, didn't seem to think they needed any freedom at all. So Jesus said, *"Everyone who sins is a slave to sin."*

Maybe you've heard the stories, or seen in one of the Luther movies how, as a young monk, Luther himself felt enslaved to sin, unable to please God—to make sufficient satisfaction—through day after day of fasting, night after night sleeping on cold floors, hours of kneeling in prayer on stone.

One year before his death, Luther reflected on these early years of his life, writing, *"As a monk I led an irreproachable life. Nevertheless I felt that I was a sinner before God. My conscience was restless, and I could not depend on God being propitiated by my satisfactions. Not only did I not love, but I actually hated the righteous God who punishes sinners... Thus, a furious battle raged within my perplexed conscience."*¹

Luther is here describing a life—even a pious Christian life—that doesn't have Jesus in His proper place, and doesn't yet understand (let alone trust in) the sole sufficiency of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for the sins of the world. Deep down in the soul, such a life is pure slavery, no matter how such a person might appear to be living.

And that's *if* such a self-proclaimed Christian has the self-discipline to lead "an irreproachable life," as Luther claimed to have lived as a monk. But how many of us experience the problem compounded in our lives by repeatedly losing the battle with Satan, as he ensnares us in a habitual sin which at first seems harmless, but eventually becomes our master, damaging our relationships with others, and regularly giving us a bad conscience? The apostle Peter says in his second epistle, *"Whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved."*² Jesus says, *"Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."*

Many of you are familiar with the hymn *"Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice!"* which was the second of some three dozen hymns that Luther wrote, and the earliest of his hymns that have

¹ From the Preface to the 1545 Wittenberg Edition of Luther's works

² 2 Peter 2:19. See also Romans 6:16-20.

stood the test of time and are still in our hymnals today. Listen to how Luther describes, in this hymn, this slavery to sin—this need for the “most holy Gospel.”

Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay; Death brooded darkly o’er me.
Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my mother bore me.
But daily deeper still I fell; My life became a living hell,
So firmly sin possessed me.

My own good works all came to naught, No grace or merit gaining;
Free will against God’s judgment fought, Dead to all good remaining.
My fears increased till sheer despair Left only death to be my share;
The pangs of hell I suffered.³

II. Freedom by what?

So that’s our need for freedom. “*Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.*” But how do we get that freedom?!

The answer might seem so simple and obvious to most of us sitting here today. As heirs of the Reformation, we have the benefit of 500 years of a reclaimed Gospel message that has permeated our Lutheran culture. From Sunday School on, we all know that the best answer to just about any important question is... “Jesus!”

But “the most holy gospel” of which Luther speaks in his 62nd thesis, wasn’t at all clear when the Reformation began. The words were there—Gospel and Jesus, and other such related words—but how to put them all together, and what exactly to say and believe about Jesus... and whether to recognize Jesus’ pre-eminent place in God’s plan of salvation, or instead to add in other requirements... these were things that the Reformation clarified through the fire of struggle, so that the Gospel, like 24 carat gold, could once again shine in all its pureness.

So how do we get that spiritual freedom that we all so desperately need? Well Jesus Himself answers that in today’s Gospel:

“If you continue in My Word, you will know the TRUTH, and the TRUTH will set you free!”
[And again He says,] *“If the SON sets you free, you will be free indeed!”*

But how does this work? How does this Son set us free, this Son who said of Himself, later in John’s Gospel, “*I AM the Way, and the TRUTH, and the Life.*”⁴ Here’s where today’s second reading from Romans chapter 3 helps us, and gives us opportunity to understand one of Luther’s breakthrough insights that “turned on the light bulb,” so to speak, and allowed Luther to reclaim an understanding of the Gospel that had been clouded over for many centuries.

³ Lutheran Service Book 556, stanzas 2 & 3

⁴ John 14:6

The key phrase, in the reading we heard from Romans chapter 3, is *“the righteousness of God.”*
*“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.... The
 righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”*

Luther and his contemporaries had been taught to understand that phrase as referring only to God. God is righteous; but we can never be. And the righteous and holy God can do nothing other than hate sin and punish the sinner. So the best we can do is strive with all our might not to sin, and work very hard at making amends for the sins we do commit by doing good works to make up for them, and then just hope that it's all enough to appease our righteous God. But we never know! And that's a terrifying way to live and die. And that was the understanding of “the righteousness of God” in Luther's early years.

But then Luther came to understand that, as God, Christ is the righteousness of God. And that Christ is given to us by faith. And everything that is Christ's, by nature—including His righteousness—is given to us! And everything that is ours by nature—including our sin—is given over to Him. (*“I Lay My Sins on Jesus!”*) And He paid for that sin by giving His righteous life, that didn't deserve to die, into death on the cross. So that now, *in Christ*—that is, as Christ-ians—this righteousness is ours too! And this righteousness of God is no longer a terrifying thing, but a beautiful, joyous, and freeing gift! *“The Truth, i.e. JESUS—Jesus, the righteousness of God—will set you free!* And, oh what joy this brings! ...this Gospel message of full and free salvation by GRACE *alone*, through FAITH *alone*, in JESUS CHRIST *alone!*

Speaking of his key insight about the righteousness of God that had come to him some 30 years earlier, Luther wrote in that same work (I mentioned earlier), written toward the end of his life:
“Now I felt as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise!... This passage from Paul became to me the very gate of Paradise!”⁵

III. Freedom for what?

So, abiding in Jesus Christ and His Word, you are free! Free from the need to fear death, or your enemies, or the consequences of sin, or anything else! Free because of Jesus Christ, the Righteousness of God, who has been given to you by faith!

But what do we then do with that freedom? Are we to live selfishly, just basking in our freedom, and hoarding every spiritual blessing from God for ourselves?

Three years to the month after posting his 95 Theses, Luther wrote a very important work entitled, *“On the Freedom of a Christian.”* In that work, he made two profound statements, around which the entire writing is organized. Luther said:

⁵ Preface to the 1545 Wittenberg edition of Luther's works, quoted in Saarnivaara, pp. 36-37. Luther was actually speaking of Romans 1:17, but this applies also to Romans 3.

- I. A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

And secondly, (at the same time):

- II. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

As he unpacks the first statement, Luther waxes eloquently all about the freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ! *"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!"*

But then, in the later part, he lays out beautifully how this isn't the end of the story, or at least not all there is to be said about the Christian life.

Let me begin to wrap up with just two paragraphs, from the great Reformer, on this freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ, and what that means for our neighbors. Luther begins by applying what Philippians 2 says about Jesus to every Christian.

"Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him. This he should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval."

"He ought to think: `Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.'"⁶

May each of you abide continually in the Word of Christ which has set you free from slavery. And as His disciples, and growing in discipleship, may the freedom that you are blessed to know free you for constant good works toward your neighbor.

Thanks be to God for the Reformation, for Martin Luther, and for the pure Gospel of Jesus, which he confessed, and we with him!

Amen!

⁶ The Freedom of a Christian, AE 31:366-367.