

Reformation Sunday
October 28, 2018
John 8:31-36

Lyle McKee
St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indiana

Freedom in Christ?

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, what does it mean in the gospel when it says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And then again later, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

What is all this business about freedom? It doesn't seem very relevant to us, does it? We are Americans, after all. We fought the War for Independence over two hundred years ago. The Constitution of the United States guarantees our liberties in the Bill of Rights. And Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation over a hundred years ago. What more do we need? We don't need to be made free if we're free already. Right?

Well, That's pretty much what the Jews said to Jesus, with a slightly different slant, when they said, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free?'"

Sort of amazing, isn't it? They could say that, even though they had been conquered many times over by the time Jesus came along. There were, in fact, occupied by the Roman army even as they said that they were totally free. They were blind to their own situation.

And maybe we're blind too. We think we're free, or so we say. We fool ourselves as easily as the disciples did. We too are occupied by foreign powers; we're enslaved by forces that seem to be beyond our control.

So what do I mean by that? Well, what about bills. Aren't many of us a paycheck away from poverty? Don't we live on the edge of disaster, in constant fear that it's all going to fall apart around our ears? And there are many other things that get in the way of our freedom. Our prejudices, our work, alcohol, drugs, television, entertainment, sports, even religion. We're often—maybe especially Lutherans—slaves to the forms and neglectful of the substance of our faith.

Martin Luther recognized the problem only too well. How about this one from his "Treatise on the Freedom of the Christian." It is among my favorites:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

At first blush, this makes less sense than Jesus' bit about needing to be free in a new way.

Even Luther recognized that this didn't appear to make sense. He continued: "These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in 1 Cor. 9:19, "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all," and in Rom. 13:8, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to the one who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was "born of woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4), and therefore was at the same time free and a servant, "in the form of God" and "of a servant. (Phil. 2:6-7).

Perhaps we muse that it would be a lot easier if Jesus had come as a king with riches. It's so hard to see how faith "pays off." People might find it easier to believe if we had some hard evidence, if there were fewer paradoxes to deal with.

And, again Luther addresses exactly this in a sermon on today's gospel.

"This is a far cry from what they had thought. They had imagined that Christ would establish a glorious empire and bestow riches and honor on everybody. They had dreamed of becoming mighty princes and of dividing the world among themselves. Christ, however, says: "You will know the truth"; that is to say, He will truly redeem you. As though He were to say: "You suppose that I will lead you into a physical empire in which you will occupy high and mighty positions. But you are mistaken, for this is not true... No, I want to bring you to a kingdom and life in which truth reigns and real life exists."

"[Jesus] wants to direct them away from external matters and away from their ambition to become kings, princes, and grand lords on earth, and to turn their minds toward becoming great lords, true kings, and powerful princes in heaven. This is the meaning of His words: "If you learn to remain in Me, then this truth will make you free."

Luther goes on to say what I said earlier:

"They were subject to the Romans and greatly oppressed by them. They had no kingdom of their own. They yearned to be free and have their own king again."

"Now Christ tells them: 'If you want to be free, to have your own king, to be rid of all tribute, and to shake off your yoke and bondage, you must believe in the Son. My kingdom is not of the world, nor is it that of the emperor. It is a kingdom of truth; it is the genuine kingdom, in which there is real life... In it truth will really make you free. But this does not exempt you from paying taxes, revenue, and tribute.' Even today the peasants would like to see the time when they would not have to submit to or obey anyone... when the servants would be lords... This [they] would have liked, and this prompts Christ to say here: 'I am not speaking now of an earthly kingdom. I am not concerned

now with earthly kings... I want to lead you into a kingdom where you will be truly free, where you will be kings, princes, and lords. If you remain faithful to My Word and believe My Message, then you can rest assured that you will become kings. All you must do is to believe the Word.'

"It sounds ridiculous that I am to be lord over the pope, over emperor and king, and over all princes. By virtue of what? Solely on the strength of my faith in Christ! For here He says: 'He who adheres to My words will know the truth, will be free, and will be My disciple.' This statement appears laughable to reason and wrong to the world, and yet it is true. Christ will have His kingdom, and it will endure... No one will dethrone Him, and no others will be capable of usurping His government. Secular emperors know only about building, sowing, and planting. But no one else is acquainted with the government of Christ, which informs man how to live before God. It is superior even to all emperors and popes. The truth shall make you free; then you are truly free, and no one shall rule over you."

Luther did go on, didn't he? But what he says is very important. Here's another way to think about it.

There was a boy who went with friends to fly kites in a breezy meadow. The children let out their kites to the ends of the strings, laughing with delight as they tossed and danced on the wind. The lad wanted to make his kite dance higher than all the rest, and so he set his kite free. Letting go of the string, he expected the kite to soar upward and finally disappear into the sky. Instead, to his great disappointment, it began to swoop and dip and spin, and soon his beautiful kite was crashing to the ground.

The boy made an honest mistake in setting his kite free, but it turned out that absolute freedom wasn't the best thing for that kite. The kite needed the tug of his hand to make it dance against the wind. In order to fly, it needed to be grounded in some way.

You and I are like that kite. There is something within us that longs for complete freedom, making us wish to cut the strings which tie us to the ground. But absolute freedom for us is death. Like the kite, we need grounding and direction. We need a tether binding us to other people, and most importantly, binding us to our God.

And there is only one thing that can provide the appropriate tether for our lives, and that is Jesus Christ. In Christ alone we find our proper grounding. God's gift of grace through Christ is firm and dependable. The truth of Christ anchors us and prevents us from either drifting away or crashing to the ground.

And that brings us back to those two statements of Luther's about the freedom of a Christian.

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

This all becomes clear only when we apply them to our lives.

First, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." We celebrate this truth at Easter. Because Christ has died for us, we are subject to no power on earth. The only master we serve is God in Christ. God's grace creates for us a free and open space where we can dance and sing and shout and celebrate without limitation. This part of Luther's paradox is easy to appreciate.

But Luther doesn't stop there. He goes on to say that "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." There's our kite string. There's the tether that binds us to our Lord and conforms our lives to his. Our freedom is limited by the love we have for Christ. Our freedom is shaped by the love we live out in relation to all human beings. As God's people we are set free, but not to serve ourselves. We are set free to do God's work. We are set free to be God's servants, and servants to every human being who cries out for food, justice, and compassion.

Our freedom in Christ is not precisely what some people might expect or desire. Christ does free us from sin, but Christ does not free us from commitments or burdens. In fact, many have found that Christ's calling actually draws the disciple into greater complications and more risky commitments, as our Lord motivates us to serve freely in a world which is not yet free.

It may do us well to remember that Martin Luther, who taught so eloquently on Christian freedom, was also the one who described himself as "captive to the word of God." Standing in the Reformation tradition, we are freed through Christ, but we are not "absolutely free." Like the reformers before us, we are bound by our commitments to God, to the church, and to service in the world.

On this Day of Reformation, we give thanks for the freedom that is ours in Christ. We also give thanks for the tether which binds us to our Savior. It is our lifeline. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.