

Sunday, October 30, 2022 – Reformation Day

John 8:31-36 (ESV) – “We’re Freed From Slavery to Sin”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

“Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’...Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’” Thus far our text.

What is truth? This has been a question that has been asked and answered many times over the centuries of human history. We might be most familiar with Pontius Pilate asking this just before he consented to Jesus being sentenced to death on the cross of Calvary, when Pilate was not sure just what was right and wrong anymore. During the Reformation era, the opposing sides to what was deemed to be the truth were the Roman hierarchy and the clear words of the Scriptures, which often directly contradicted one another. Today, we have “moved beyond” such elementary discussions of which truth is right and which truth is wrong, and think that we have solved the problem by professing “relative morality”, in which one set of truths is just as valid as another, depending on how fervently one believes in them. Whatever the case, the truth is an elusive concept.

Whenever we try to separate the truth from the Scriptures, where God has revealed to us what we need to know about Him and the things to come in heaven, we can easily get ourselves into trouble. But, the Reformation was a pursuit of the true, absolute truth, and Martin Luther

was a scholar who was just trying to let the Scripture speak for itself, rather than reading summaries and interpretations of the same. He just couldn't believe that a loving and merciful God would cause His Son to die on the cross of Calvary, and then still leave something for sinful man to accomplish on his own in order to be freed from his bondage to the sinful nature. Luther found, specifically through his reading of Paul's letter to the Romans, the truth that Jesus speaks of in John's Gospel that we are considering today – the truth that there is only one set of merits that counts toward our salvation, and that is Christ's.

The difference between our lives before and after Jesus' atonement is the difference between night and day, between slavery and freedom. This watershed event over two thousand years ago, predicated and predicted all the way back to Genesis chapter 3, just after Adam and Eve's fall into sin, changed the entire course of human history. No longer are we bound and chained eternally because of our sinful natures; we are saved from our sins, and restored to the joys of heaven, solely by Jesus' blood and merit. The battle to resurrect this clear teaching, and eliminate any instruction that would detract from Jesus' complete and sole sufficiency for our salvation, is precisely what the Reformation was all about. This also characterizes the struggles that our Lutheran church continues to be involved in today – the preservation of the truth, using whatever means God chooses to give us to do so.

There are a whole host of criteria that people try to use to substitute for Christ's free and full salvation to all men. The Jews that Jesus was speaking to thought that they were saved because of their nationality, their heritage, the promise that was theirs because Abraham was their blood-relative, and had "walked with God." After all, these were the "chosen people", that God had protected and preserved through all those years in the desert, and forgave more times than they could even count for gross sins of idolatry against Him. The Jews that Jesus was

talking with didn't want to acknowledge the possibility that some other groups of people were going to be saved without going through all of these struggles. They had been through thick and thin with God, and they knew all about suffering for His Name, didn't they? They had it all figured out, and thought that their nationality, not their faith, would save them.

The Roman church at the time of the Reformation held that one must confess the Pope, when on the seat of Peter, to be infallible and God's representative on earth, in order to be saved. This belief is still Roman doctrine even today. They created a requirement for salvation that bound God's promise to an earthly church hierarchy, and publicly taught that anyone outside of the umbrella of the institutional Roman church would be condemned by God. While this might have begun as an early form of protecting the church from false teachers and false doctrine, it had evolved into excluding those who refused to support and declare unswerving allegiance to specific human leaders. It got to the point that the church was able to decide who was deserving of being forgiven their sins, rather than all being forgiven who confess with a true heart. Further, the church proclaimed the ability to dole out this forgiveness in return for payment of money.

We today come up with a whole host of reasons why we should be saved, apart from the merits and work of Christ. We think that we are saved because we are from a good church-going family (even if this stretches back generations to find someone who was a "pillar of the church"). We think that we are saved because of our "decision to follow Jesus", and that we play some active part in our own salvation, or that we are at least able to "save face" by doing something, rather than being lifeless and dead in our trespasses and sins. This change in the central truth of the Gospel, of Christ's full and complete atonement, continues even today, even within our own midst.

We need to re-discover the crucial importance of this teaching that salvation comes from God's grace alone, through faith, not by our works, so that no man can boast. The objections against this clear teaching haven't disappeared, but rather have been minimized by those who would say that there is no reason for disagreement anymore. We can't get rid of two competing definitions of the truth of God's Word just for the sake of "getting along." These two opinions, faith and works, are different coins, not just different sides of the same coin. If we say that we have anything to do with our salvation, including having the ability to "choose God", then Christ didn't truly do it all on the cross of Calvary. If someone is in heaven, in whole or in part, because he was a "good person", then Christ didn't really need to die, did he? This is really the crux of the matter – if we contribute to our own salvation, then we really aren't in need of a Savior, are we? This is where sinful human nature comes in when it comes to desiring works-based salvation. We truly want there to be no need for a Savior, because this is the same as saying that there nothing wrong with us. That's what the Jews were saying to Jesus, when they stated that they had never been slaves to anyone. We, too, deny that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We think that we are just fine, when we are actually mortally ill. This adrenaline, this euphoria, eventually wears off, and we are left with the despair of the truth of the matter that we truly cannot save ourselves. But, whether we are euphoric or destitute, the only way to be freed from our slavery to sin is by an outside intervention (i.e. Jesus) to make us free. That's precisely what He did on the cross, and continues to do in our midst through His Word and Sacraments.

There are plenty of Christian denominations out there that go down this path toward works theology, or minimizing differences in theology just for the sake of an increased "market share" in the mission field. Let's face it – the task of doing the Lord's work in this world is no

easier (or harder) now than it has ever been. Our task is to preach the truth, without swerving to the right or to the left, and to do so in a winsome and clear way. People didn't want to hear what Jesus had to say, and so they conspired to nail Him to a tree and killed Him. Should we be in any doubt as to what they will do to us for following in His footsteps with the same message?

Further, if we take the model of the business world, then we'd combine with anyone who was willing to join up with us. That's what has happened in many denominations in recent years. They've sacrificed the truth of the doctrines they teach for the sake of making life easier for themselves, or to get more and more people into the pews on Sunday morning. Never mind the fact that there is little left to come and listen to. They are willing to do this for the sake of "survival" in this world. On the other hand, we don't state that there is unity with a church body unless and until we agree on the teachings of the Bible, and the doctrines of the Book of Concord, a faithful exposition of the Sacred Scriptures. If we say that we agree, and yet don't, we are either being dishonest, or at least being premature in making such an announcement. While we hope and pray for eventual agreement between Christian church bodies in the TRUTH, we also realize that this may quite possibly not happen this side of heaven.

The bottom line is, then, that conditions are similar enough to the time of the Reformation that there is still a need for denominational separations within the Christian church on earth. It's been said that we shouldn't continue to have divisions in the church, because there aren't major enough issues left to fight over, and there aren't enough substantial differences between denominations to matter much. With issues such as the Real Presence of Christ in the Body and Blood of the Lord's Supper, the confession or denial of the Scriptures as the true and inspired Word of God, and an assertion or denial of Jesus' sacrifice as the only cause of our salvation, we still have many major issues which need to be ironed out. We can't just wave a

magic wand and say that these important, crucial issues just don't matter anymore. If these issues don't matter, then nothing matters! If we concede that we should "agree to disagree" on these things and focus on what we agree on, there won't be much to talk about, now will there?

We don't give in on these issues, because they are the very heart of the Gospel. If we believe that we are somehow saved by our own merits, then we lose the glorious gift of peace that God gives to us, that He has saved us and that we are His. If our salvation depends upon something that we do, then we need to worry every day if we have done enough. But, if it depends on what Christ has done for us, then we have the privilege to flee to Him for refuge, and have our burdens lightened by Him just as He has promised us. If we lose the Scriptures as the rule and norm of all doctrine, as wholly inspired by the Holy Spirit through the written words of the human writers, then we've lost everything! The Bible is the information that we have been given about the things of God. If we lose God's Word, or minimize it to something that is a shell of what it once was, then there's nothing left at all. If we aren't sure what God meant in His Word, or if there is even a possibility that He can change His mind, then we have no assurance whatsoever, and nothing to pin our hope to in this sinful, painful world. His promises to never leave us nor forsake us, but to save us and draw us closer to Himself, are just empty words if we don't have the inspired Word of God to back them up. If we lose the Lord's Supper as God's way of giving us tangibly the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our bodies to continue on in this sinful world, then we've lost one of the greatest gifts that He has deigned to give to us. What reason could we possibly give to negate such a treasure? That it doesn't make sense to us? The things of God are so wonderful that they don't make sense to us sinful creatures. God is not limited in His blessings to us by our ability to understand them.

It's the birthday of the Lutheran church this week. 497 years ago, Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the castle door in Wittenberg, setting into motion the first events of the Lutheran Reformation. I don't think that he even had a clue the revolution that he was setting off. I think that Luther was just as confused as most of us are today concerning the things of God. What he did know, however, was that the church wasn't telling the people the whole story, and was rather selling the forgiveness of God for money, rather than declaring it free of charge as God's free and perfect gift. The theology that Paul wrote about to the Roman Christians, about salvation being a free gift of God, apart from our works, would be revealed completely to Luther later. But, the Holy Spirit was already working within him to ask questions, and leading him to search the Scriptures, and not the institutional church, for answers.

Now, this wouldn't mean much of anything to us today, and would make an interesting chapter in the history books, except for the fact that the same battle is still waging within the church even today. We are still fighting for the truth to be unfettered and proclaimed without reservation in many churches today. Some have grown so weary with the fights for the truth that have waged on for centuries, that they deny that absolute truth even exists, and posit that the only truth is what is true for each one of us. We pray that God would give us new zeal to carry this unique message and teaching that He has given us to the ends of the earth, using the resources that He has given us to undertake this worthy task, and drawing upon the strength He gives us to continue to be His heralds amidst persecutions and struggles. He alone is our reason for hope, because He died and rose again for our salvation. Nothing else counts when it comes to the reason for the hope that lies within us. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.