

A few years ago, I provided premarital counseling to a couple that was just about to graduate from college. We were talking about their aspirations. The young man said his first goal was “financial freedom,” which I thought was rather ambitious for a 21-year old who was a history major. So I asked him, “How do you define ‘financial freedom’?” And he said, “You know, having a job.”

“Freedom!” That was the last word 13th century Scot, William Wallace, cried as he died at the hand of the English. (You might remember him from the movie, Braveheart, with Mel Gibson.) Freedom: It’s the premise of the American constitution; it’s the ultimate heartfelt longing of every person, of every living creature, on this planet.

Today, we remember the beginning of the Reformation, that day 502 years ago when Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses or statements which challenged the teachings of the church, which, he argued, withheld from the people what God had promised: Freedom. This morning we’re going to talk about what this has to do with our walk with God and each other.

OPENING PRAYER

JOHN 8:31-36

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples,³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever.³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

The Gospel reads that **“Jesus said to the Jews... ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’³³ They answered him, ‘We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, “You will become free”?” (vv. 31-33)**

It's almost humorous the Jews said they had "**never been enslaved by anyone,**" because, of course, they had been enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, and Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, and others; they had been enslaved by everyone! Indeed, the Jews have enjoyed only brief periods of freedom in their 4,000 year history.

On the other hand, perhaps the Jews claimed their freedom in spiritual terms, as in, God blessed Abraham and therefore he blessed them by virtue of their bloodline. This blessing was a true blessing—as true as the sky is blue—and thus if anyone had been set free by truth, it was them!

But that wasn't exactly what the Lord had in mind. God had said to Abraham, "**I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; ³... and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed**" (Genesis 12:2-3).

God promised Abraham that his descendants would be "**a great nation**" so that they would be a blessing to the whole world, which obviously didn't work out. Instead of being God's emissaries and taking his gracious invitation to "**all the families of the earth,**" Israel kept it to themselves. They claimed their inheritance without living up to their end of the bargain.

When I was a kid, Mom would send me to the store to buy her a pack of cigarettes. (You could do that back then.) If I had returned home with Pop Tarts instead of cigarettes, how do you think Mom would have responded? She would not have thanked me for not doing what she told me to do! No, but she would've beat me within an inch of my life!

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus illustrated how the inheritance-bloodline argument doesn't fly with God. He told the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Lazarus was a beggar, and the rich man did not show him mercy. When they died, Lazarus went to heaven and the rich man went to hell. But both men were Jewish. The point is that being Jewish, being physically related to Abraham, cannot not save you (Luke 16:19-31).

So when Jesus said to the Jews "**everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin**" he blew up their argument. He had them, didn't he? For not one of them could say

he was without sin. He had taken them to the very foundation of their humanity, that they were not free in their hearts, that they were not free before God. They could not deny they were in bondage to the lusts and cravings of their flesh.

But don't misunderstand: The Jews had the right intentions: they greatly feared offending God, and so they created laws on top of laws to minimize their risk of sinning. In other words, they thought they could outrun sin through obedience. But, alas, obedience does not change what is in a person's heart.

Again, **“Jesus said... If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples,³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.... (and) if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (vv. 31-32,36).**

Martin Luther described his experience with sin as the “judge and hangman.” The condemnation of the devil, the world, and his own self-condemnation imprisoned his heart and prevented him from receiving God's grace with faith and thankfulness. In his spirit, he was cast into the dungeon of darkness by his unmitigated shame and regret. He tried to free himself, but like the Jews, he could not outrun sin and judgment through obedience, and he was spiritually at death's door.

That's what his 95 Theses were about. The teachings of the church had created an impossible path to God, a path of shame and the threat of God's wrath, believing that these things would bring about obedience. But as we know, even if you can obey God's law, even to the third degree, obedience does not change your heart.

Again, Jesus said, **“if you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples.”** As Luther struggled to understand this, he studied God's Word, and therein he found the key to his dungeon and freedom from the judge and hangman, from his own heart that condemned him. For in the Word he read about how Christ declared to the thief on the cross, **“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”** This man had known Jesus for just a few hours, but already he had been inducted into the family of God and blessed with the assurance of salvation and eternal life.

As Luther read his Bible he reflected on Jesus declaration of forgiveness from the Cross – **“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”** – and he received them as his own.

Luther heard Jesus' gracious invitation, **"Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest,"** and he fell into the arms of his savior, Jesus. He believed, and he was set free from sin, from death, and from the shame and guilt he carried around in his heart.

St. Paul wrote to the church in Rome that **"we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28)**. That's it: faith in Jesus rescues us from death. And he wrote to the Galatians, **"if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29)**. Which is to say, if you have faith in Jesus, you are in heir of God's promises to Abraham.

Obedience never saved anyone, except in the human sense, as in, if Mom told me to buy her cigarettes, I bought her cigarettes! But before God, obedience does not free me from the judge and hangman of my conscience. Faith in Christ who makes us heirs of the Kingdom as the offspring of Abraham is the key to our prison cell.

When I was 6-years old I had this recurring nightmare about death: Over and over again I was thrown into an open grave, and I was buried alive as dirt was shoveled onto me. (My evil stepbrothers may've been partly to blame for this, taking me to countless movies about mummies who ran amok.) But as I got to know Jesus, my fears dissolved, they melted away, and my fear of death dissolved.

Nonetheless, the judge and hangman were never far from me. Many times over the years I contended with them. I remember how when I was in high school I worried about my future work, or lack thereof. But as I grew in my understanding of how Jesus is the Lord of heaven and of earth, that he's the Lord of my very life, that he holds me in the palm of his hand, this worry also fell away.

Even now, I contend with the judge and hangman: I will think, "My relationships are not what they should be. I have not been pure in my thoughts. My work is not up to snuff. My motives are not as sincere as they should be. I have not been disciplined with my words." And there they are, and they throw me into the dungeon of shame, guilt, and self-loathing.

But Jesus proclaimed, **"if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** The Lord wasn't talking about financial or political freedom. He was talking about being

free today, in our conscience and in our spirit, in our hearts and in our minds. He sets me free, and he sets you free too, not because of who we are or what we have done. No. He sets us free because of who he is and what he has done.

Again, Jesus said, **“if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”** When I receive these words as my own, I take a deep breath of the fresh air of Paradise, and all my burdens fall away. I am free!

This is our battle cry: **“We are free!”** Please say it with me: (We are free!) This is why we love Jesus, this is what it means to be a child of God, this is the only message we have for a dying world. We are free! Please say it with me again: (We are free!)

Friends in Christ, we are free men and women. We always have been free, in Christ. But the world and our own consciences demand justification for our right to take up a single square inch of space on this planet, that we validate our existence, that we prove that we deserve to be here.

But we are free! God loves you so much, he gave you his only begotten son, Jesus, **“that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).**

Indeed, Jesus is freedom incarnate. In his spirit he was not bound by sin, he was without a blemish in his own conscience for any wrongdoing. In his heart, Jesus was not constrained in his words or deeds by any human institution. And in his body, even when he was put to death, he demonstrated how full, how complete, and how true his freedom was when he rose from the grave on the 3rd day.

Jesus said, **“If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples.”** By definition, a disciple imitates his teacher; he’s an ardent follower, a carbon copy of the original. He clings to his teacher’s every word. Jesus received us as his disciples so that we might become like him, freed from our spiritual dungeons to live in his joy and peace.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week as you confront the demands of the world and your own heart, may you abide in the Words of Jesus. Though the world

judges you, the only judgment that matters is God's, and he's judged you to be his son, his daughter, and he loves you so very much.

This week may you use your freedom to express to others in your work, your school, and in your home, in all of your relationships, your thankfulness and devotion to the Lord who liberated your heart.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.