

It is in our nature to evaluate how we're doing and to strive for improvement. Indeed, this is one of the things that distinguishes us from the animals. Today is Reformation Sunday, a memorial to that time 500 years ago when Martin Luther led the church to do the same, questioning what it had become during its 1500 year history. This morning we're going to consider what this means for us in our day-to-day walk with the Lord and with each other in our meditation from John's Gospel.

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.

I think it's humorous the Jews said they had "**never been enslaved by anyone,**" because, of course, they had been enslaved by everyone! The Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, the Greeks and the Romans: They had been enslaved by them all!

In truth, however, I think that when they said this to Jesus, they were trying to derail him with a philosophical argument, as in, because we are God's Chosen People we serve no one but God himself. But trying to outsmart Jesus with this kind of argument is like trying to set a fireman on fire. It's not going to happen. So instead of enumerating their oppressors as I just did, Jesus looked into their hearts and said, "**everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.**" ZING!

He had them there, right? For not one of them could say he was without sin. Among themselves they had measured their lives against the things of this world, and indeed, they thought of themselves as pretty good fellas. But their goodness and their freedom ended with those things which were merely external, physical, and material.

Freedom is an idea we throw around in a lot of different ways. I remember a couple still in college for whom I provided premarital counseling. We were talking about "long range

goals.” The young man said his first goal was “financial freedom.” I thought that 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.” Of course, if you’ve ever been a destitute college student, you know exactly what he was talking about!

“Freedom!” That was the last word of William Wallace, the 13th century liberator of Scotland in the movie Braveheart. He was crying out for freedom from the political and economic tyranny of the British as he was being executed.

What will we not give for freedom? Freedom from political oppression, financial burdens, and racial and gender inequality is something people have striven for, for a long, long time. It is the first premise of American democracy; it is the bottom-line against which we measure the quality of our lives. Freedom.

So how was your week? How’s your health? Was work, was school, good, or were your days filled with frustration? How are your relationships? Do you have peace in your heart with everyone in your world, or do you feel like things are pretty crummy? Are you free?

Martin Luther described the condemnation of the devil, the world, and that which lies in our own hearts as the “judge and hangman.” Which is to say, everything inside and outside of us which might steal away our joy, our happiness for being alive, is darkness and shame and ultimately death.

But Jesus said, **“If you abide in My WORD, you are truly My disciples, 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.”**

God loves us so much he gave us his only begotten son, Jesus, who freed us from the bondage of sin. He set us free from the devil’s torment of our hearts, from the things in this world which would crush our spirits, and from the guilt and shame we carry in our souls. HE SET YOU FREE!

Indeed, Jesus is freedom incarnate. In his spirit he was not bound by sin, and he was without a blemish in his own conscience for any wrongdoing. In his heart, he 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.

Again, 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 so that we would be freed from the dungeons of the judge and hangman and live in his joy and peace.

Brothers and sisters, if you are free in Christ, say Amen! (Amen!)

When I was very young I greatly feared death. I had a picture in my mind of being dropped into a hole and having dirt thrown in my face. My evil step-brothers may’ve been partly to blame for this, having made a conscious effort to take me to as many movies about mummies terrorizing villages when I was 6-years old, as they could. Anyway, I thought and dreamed about this a lot. But as I got to know Jesus, those thoughts dissolved; they melted away.

I remember when I was only 10-years old I had nightmares that I was drafted to fight in the Vietnam War. When I awoke I’d figure out how long this war would have to go on if I was to be drafted. But as I grew in faith this fear also fell away.

I remember how when I was in high school I worried about my future work, or lack thereof, and how this was a source of great anxiety. But as I grew in my understanding of how Jesus is the Lord of heaven and of earth, that he’s the Lord of even my life, this worry also melted away. I had come to believe that my whole life was in God’s hands. Jesus was teaching me what freedom really is. I was growing as his disciple day by day.

But every day I encounter the judge and hangman. They won’t leave me alone. They say to me, “You should be more, you could have more, if you would only do more.” And I’m imprisoned in the devil’s dungeon again.

But Jesus proclaimed: **“If the Son sets you FREE, you will be FREE indeed.”** The Lord wasn’t talking about something that happens when we are financially independent or politically liberated. He was talking about being FREE today, in our hearts and in our minds, in our conscience and in our spirit, set free because of who he is.

But every day I think, “My relationships are not what they should be. My work is not done. I’ve broken promises, and some pretty stupid things have come out of my mouth.” And again, I’m imprisoned, and the judge and hangman take me away.

But again, Jesus said, **“If the Son sets you FREE, you will be FREE indeed.”** When I receive these words as my own, the prison doors melt away before my eyes.

Friends in Christ, we are free men and women. We always have been free, in Christ. But alas, we just don't know how to live day-by-day in this freedom yet.

St. Paul wrote, **Romans 3:28**, “**we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**”

The world and our own consciences demand justification of 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 whatever it is we've got.

But Paul gave up on the world's program. He made it clear that what is real, what is true, is a relationship with Jesus, and there's nothing else. He wrote that all of his good works were “**filthy rags**,” and then he asked, “**what becomes of our boasting?**” No one can boast of anything in himself, he said, for we're “**justified by faith**,” a gift from God. He wrote, **2nd Corinthians 10:17**, “**Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.**” Indeed, if our life in Christ is our freedom, it is in his work we take pride.

Paul also wrote, **2nd Corinthians 11:30**, “**If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.**” This is entirely counter-cultural, isn't it. In the morning when I awake the first thing that enters my mind is THE LIST, the long list of things I must do in order to justify my existence. This LIST has two invisible categories: The things that will get done and the things that won't get done. And my conscience rages with all kinds of guilt and frustration at the end of the day! But then I meditate on the words of my Lord – “**If the Son sets you FREE, you will be FREE indeed**” – and I believe; I know in my heart that God is my judge, my only judge, and that he has set me free.

“IF THE SON SETS YOU FREE, YOU WILL BE FREE INDEED.”

Friends in Christ, if you believe Jesus has set you free, say Amen! (Amen!)

In **Psalm 145:18-19**, we read, “**The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear Him; and He hears their cry and saves them.**”

With the Psalmist we cry out to God “**in truth**,” bearing our hearts before him, and he lifts us up from the darkness, pouring his light down upon us, showing us the way, lifting up our heads, removing our fears, and filling us with joy, for he has set us free.

The path the church had taken before Martin Luther's day had led the people into bondage. The shame of sin, the threat of God's wrath, and the horrors of hell was their prison cell. But Luther saw the light of Christ, that light which pours down from the Cross on Calvary and dispels the darkness of men and women's hearts and sets them free. That's the message we proclaim and celebrate today, the 500th birthday of the Reformation.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week when you confront the demands of the world and your own LIST of coulds, woulds, and shoulds, may you abide in God's Word, that Word that expresses his divine and eternal love for you. 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 that he has set you free.

This week may you experience this freedom in your work, your school, and in your home, in your relationships with one another, and in your heart of hearts, knowing that in the end the only thing that matters is the truth of Jesus Christ.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this good news with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.