

The Festival of the Reformation (transferred)
29 October, Anno Domini 2023
St. John 8:31-36

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

Freed sons and daughters of the Most High God,

Everywhere you look there are people crying out for freedom. Palestinians and Israelis longing for freedom from war and terror. Citizens of this country wanting freedom from government overreach and intrusion. Grieving families longing for freedom from the violence that plagues our streets. Christians all over the world longing for the freedom to worship Christ openly and conduct their daily lives according to the Word of God. People longing for freedom from a justice system that can sometimes feel as though the least of its concerns is justice.

Others operate with a very perverted definition of freedom which boils down to nothing more than being able to do whatever you want, whenever you want, wherever you want, with whomever you want. Such people want the freedom to live according to lies for no other reason than they want to. They want the freedom to live without and against the truth and you are expected to not only let them but also participate in the lie by calling it truth.

As we celebrate the Reformation it's not uncommon to hear that the greatest goal and outcome of the Reformation was religious freedom - the freedom to worship according to the dictates of your conscience without interference. And, certainly, as a result of some of the conflict of the Reformation and the need for unity against the invading Turks, the rulers within the Holy Roman Empire were granted the authority to choose the religion of their territory.

But if we think that either Jesus or Paul or Luther or any of the other reformers were first and foremost interested in everyone being able to worship whoever and however they wanted, then we are not only sorely mistaken and poor students of history, we are also as blind to our slavery as the Jews were, and therefore the actual freedom we need. Consequently, many Christians use their Christian freedom as a cloak for unrighteousness as though Christ was crucified so that we could have a blank check to sin against God's Word. Many have come to believe that in God's view we are able to worship Him however we individually choose. We often imagine that as long as we claim to be spiritual and try to be good

people, then God will be pleased with us. We don't pray or read the Bible or tithe or help our neighbor because we think we have been set free from these things. We think that Jesus has abolished the Law so that now we are able to be Christians in the way we want to be Christians. In other words, we often act as though Christ died in order to make sin acceptable to God.

That is not freedom and that is not what Jesus sets you free to do. Jesus said "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." (John 8:34) No one gets to claim freedom after a statement like that. Daily, hourly, we find ourselves not simply tempted but indulging selfish, covetous, idolatrous, murderous, and adulterous thoughts. We might not actually carry them out, but we play them through in our heads, we refuse to drive them out with prayer and the Word of God, we indulge them under the delusion that thoughts don't hurt anyone. Add those to our laziness, our pride, our disrespect, our foul language and course joking, our immodesty, and our gossiping and backbiting and there is simply no way we can deny it - we are slaves serving the will of the devil to destroy us. We use the forgiveness of Christ as a cloak for all kinds of unrighteousness.

And what do you get from sin? What has your sin gained you other than, at best, a moment of pleasure? "The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) Your slavery is a slavery unto death. Every even momentary indulgence of that which is contrary to God's Word condemns you and reveals the truth that your sinful flesh still delights to serve the will of hell's tyrant. And the devil is genius. He blinds us to the only thing that matters by drawing our attention to anything and everything that is fleeting and, in many ways, completely irrelevant. Most of us, having lived through years of plenty, have come to so despise discomfort and suffering that there is nothing we will not do to avoid it. We struggle to say no to impulse purchases that are only a click and credit card away. Rather than put the best construction on the words and deeds of our neighbor we jump to the worst possible conclusions and quickly begin slanderous campaigns against them. We panic at the thought of not having cupboards full of food and burgeoning savings account and life insurance policies. Our hearts grow anxious if we can't find our phones or our internet or cable TV isn't working. We don't discipline our children or keep them from the dangerous things that expose them to evil because we don't want to upset them or leave them feeling left out among their peers. We speak with our own mouths the world's lies about marriage and human sexuality because we don't want to be labeled a bigot or hateful.

But fleeing from suffering by embracing sin can only ever result in despising your vocation and therefore your neighbor. You can't love your neighbor without cost,

without inconvenience, without suffering on some level. You can't devote yourself to the Word of God without suffering the consequent assaults of the devil, the hatred of the world, and the kicking and screaming of your own flesh which is forever a toddler ruled by nothing higher than his emotions and desires of the moment.

This is one of the plagues of our day which we need to be on guard against and root out in ourselves - slavery to our feelings. Everywhere we turn we are encouraged to give full voice to our emotions because that is the only way to be our authentic selves. Whether it is anger or lust or covetousness or laziness or boredom, we are told we should just be these things as though they are who we are. These are supposedly right and good simply because they are how we are feeling and thinking. It is said to be wrong to expect a person to exercise self-control over their thoughts and desires and feelings and actions.

That is also slavery. Each of us needs to learn to discipline our flesh, control our emotions and actions. Our flesh, as it desires only sin, needs to be held in check and controlled. Imagine the chaos and harm that would result if everyone just allowed their every emotion and thought and desire to rule them and govern their behavior! St. Paul wrote to Titus "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age." (Titus 2:11-12) Obeying the desires of the flesh is slavery. It is slavery to selfishness and ungodliness that leads only to eternal death.

Christ has come precisely to set us free from such foolishness. He has come in order to rescue us from the futile and deadly slavery of self-indulgence. He came living in our flesh the perfect life of freedom, a life of servitude to God and neighbor. He came to live in love by laying down his life to pay the full wages of your sin, to succumb to your death, to rescue you from the tyranny of the devil. And there is no other way for you to be free of this slavery. No other man can pay for your sin. No other price is sufficient. You can't work your way out or merit God's favor. Only the true Son, begotten of the Father from eternity has the power and authority to set you free. It is a free gift given freely by God to all who would receive it. And by His death and resurrection, Christ has disarmed Satan by removing the guilt of every accusation that he would level against you to keep you in slavery.

In your Baptism, Christ separated you from the multitude of unbelievers, drowned your Old Adam, and brought you safely through into His kingdom, a kingdom of

mercy and love, a kingdom of forgiveness. In this kingdom you are free to live as He has created man to live. You are free from the desperate need to seek pleasure and self-fulfillment. You are free from having to be blown about by your fleeting emotions and desires. You are free to serve God with a clean conscience in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. You are free to live according to the truth which God has revealed in Holy Scripture rather than according to the lies which fill the world.

The freedom of the Word of God is the true freedom, the only freedom that gives peace and rest to the conscience. It is the only freedom that can exist even when you find yourself in the darkest hour of suffering, bound up by the chains of sickness or persecution or fear. It is freedom not to indulge your flesh but to deny it, to chasten it, to bring it into submission. This is the freedom that has been bestowed upon you and which remains yours as you live the life of confession and absolution, acknowledging your sins and receiving Christ's word of forgiveness. This is the freedom you have as you daily fight against the desires of your flesh and strive to bring every thought captive to Christ. It is the freedom you have as you work to replace the screeching noise of the world with the quiet peace of the voice of the Good Shepherd. It is the freedom that you have as you say "No" to the frivolous ways in which the devil works hard to swallow up your time and keep you from studying the Scriptures, praying, and being in the Lord's house to hear His Word and feast on the Blessed Sacrament of your Savior's Body and Blood.

Children of God, you are free. You are free in Christ. You remain free as you remain in His Word and do not return to the slavery of self-indulgence and unbelief. You remain free as you remain rooted in who God has made you in the waters of Holy Baptism. Only do not return to the slavery from which you were redeemed. Do not give time or space to the desires of your flesh. Put them to death. Drown them again and again. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. This is the freedom for which Christ suffered and died and rose again and has freely bestowed upon you.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus.