

John 8:31-38 - “True Freedom”

“Dear Christians One and All Rejoice” (vv. 2-4) - Midweek Lent 1

Do you think you're free? After all, you live in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Much of our society today promotes personal freedom, which is often interpreted to mean that you're free to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone, or interfere with their freedom. We're witnessing in our world today that this notion of freedom doesn't work, especially when people, in order to enable them to do what ever they want, start making up their own definition of what it means to hurt someone else by saying, for example, that life doesn't begin at conception. That way, you can hurt and even kill an unborn child (which they wouldn't call a child but a collection of cells). By similar bizarre reasoning, the person who thinks they're free to do whatever they want often fails to see how their freedoms often interfere with the freedoms of others and what they want, such as the Christian's desire to simply speak God's word of truth.

Another name for this ungodly notion of freedom is being autonomous which can be defined as being a law to oneself or being totally independent. When the notion of autonomy is applied to the area of ethics the result is, again, what we're witnessing in our society today when it comes to things like people being free to define their identity as something other than male or female, and getting rid of any boundaries when it comes to sexual relationships. And it won't stop there. That's one of the reasons I think they put a + after LGBTQ.

Are you free to do anything you want? Not really. Werner Elert, a Lutheran theologian of the last century, spoke of being autonomous as “an unfulfilled illusion.” It's an unfulfilled illusion because, whether a person believes in God or not, we are never free from God and what He says in His word of truth. That truth includes the fact that those who reject the boundaries of God's Word will be bound by the devil and eternal death. There are no other options. That's why man's thoughts of being free, autonomous, or independent are an illusion.

The Jews in our Gospel reading said, “*We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.*” Really? What about their slavery in Egypt? What about their exile in Babylon? And what about the control the Romans currently had over them?

But these were not their greatest enemies which enslaved them. It was their own sinful hearts which rejected God's way of salvation in favor of a belief that they could set themselves free from their sins by their own good works. All the other earthly times of slavery were allowed by God to help them see that they were not autonomous people who could set themselves free.

Martin Luther was under this illusion of man-made or man-accomplished freedom when he tried to free himself from God's judgement by going into a monastery and taking a vow of poverty. We at times fall into the same trap whenever we are tempted to think that we can earn God's

freedom from our sins—His favor—by a big offering, treating our spouse extra nice for a few days, or giving up something for Lent.

But by the time Luther wrote verses/stanza's 2 and 3 of our theme hymn for these midweek sermons in Lent, he was obviously well aware of his faulty reasoning when it came to freedom,, as well as the truth of Jesus' words in our text that *"everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,"* ²"Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; death brooded darkly over me. Sin was my torment night and day; in sin my mother bore me. But daily deeper still I fell; my life became a living hell, so firmly sin possessed me. ³My own good works all came to naught, no grace or merit gaining; free will against God's judgment fought, dead to all good remaining. My fears increased till sheer despair left only death to be my share; the pangs of hell I suffered."

If that's all Scripture revealed to us, that we're helpless sinners, our life would be a living hell as well, and we, like Luther, would hate God rather than love Him. Thankfully, Luther and we have also come to know and believe (by the grace of God) in our Lord's words that, while *"the slave does not remain in the house, the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

When the Son of God, who willingly took on our flesh in Jesus Christ, fulfilled the law by His life of perfect obedience, suffered a damning death in payment for our sins, and then rose from the dead in victory of our sins and death; when He sets us free, we are free indeed! Not free from God, but free from our sins, death and the devil, and grateful to be included back into God's eternal family as sons and daughters who remain forever.

It's through this Good News in God's word that the Spirit works to give us faith in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross to set us free. That's why 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"*—free from our sins and the curse of the law, the darkness of death, and the clutches of Satan, who wants us to believe that we can live autonomous, independent lives, as if we were God.

Freedom is not to be found in living as though God did not exist so that we can be what our sinful nature wants us to be. Freedom is found only in our Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who (because of His mercy and love for us) frees us from our sins so that we can be what He created us to be, children of God.

This is the gracious and merciful freedom that Luther speaks of in verse/stanza 4. "But God has seen my wretched state before the world's foundation, and mindful of His mercies great, He planned for my salvation. He turned to me a father's heart; He did not choose the easy part but gave His dearest treasure," referring to Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.