

“Freedom in Jesus” | John 8:31-36 | Reformation Sunday
Pastor Nick Shults | St. Mark Lutheran Church | Sunnyvale, CA

Focus: Through the Word of Jesus God brings His people true and lasting freedom

Function: That my hearers would place their trust in the freedom offered by Jesus and not in themselves.

Structure: 4 pages of the Sermon

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In 1517 when Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, he had no idea the kind of a firestorm that this simple act would set off. Luther only wanted to bring some points up for an academic debate. He just wanted to have a conversation.

Luther had seen the terrible and immoral things that were happening in Rome, the capital of Christendom, and Luther had seen with his very eyes a man named Johann Tetzel traveling around selling indulgences; pieces of paper that guaranteed the purchaser less time in purgatory after death. Tetzel even had a catchphrase: “as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs!” Understandably, this didn’t sit well with Brother Luther. So, he wanted to talk about it. He wanted to know why the Pope, when he had the riches of the Gospel at his disposal, would resort to selling pieces of paper as a pretext for forgiving sins.

What Luther wanted, ultimately, was to see people free. He wanted to bring freedom from sin, death, and the devil to people whose consciences were tormented....to people who lived in fear that they had not done enough, they had not accrued enough merits to please an angry God. Luther wanted to bring freedom to the people because this is what Jesus brought. And Luther wanted to make Christianity only and always about Jesus.

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Trouble in the Text

It’s fascinating, though, how this freedom, or the *need* for such freedom is resisted.

In our Gospel reading this morning from John 8 Jesus makes an assertion. He says, **“If you abide in my word, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”**

The response to Jesus is astounding because they don’t seem to have a good grasp on their history as a people nor on their current life situation. “We have never been slaves to anyone” they insist! I guess they don’t remember Egypt where the sons and daughters of Abraham lived and worked in bondage for 400 years.. I guess they don’t remember Assyria or Babylon, powerful nations that overtook them and carried them off to live as servants . I guess they don’t remember that even though they are back, living in the land God had promised to Abraham, it’s not really under their control. They are not free, they are

dominated by the Romans and one wrong move will set them on a path to total annihilation.

This people, the nation of Israel, had spent almost their entire existence as slaves yet they aren't willing to admit it.

Trouble in the World –

It strikes me that we have a lot in common with this crew of Jewish believers in Jesus.

As people living in the United States we seem to have a pretty good grasp on freedom. You and I, we fancy ourselves autonomous beings, don't we? We can pretty much do whatever we want, whenever we want, however we want. Because we're free, after all, aren't we? As kids, when we were doing something another kid didn't like a common retort was, "Hey, it's a free country! I'll do what I want!"

As Americans, we look at the political freedom we won and have maintained and we seem to understand what it means...to be free. And really, at the center of freedom, is the self. That's how the constitution sets it up, isn't it? Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

And that's all well and fine but the fact of the matter is that, as we enjoy our freedom, we are blind to that which enslaves us. Enslaves us? We are Americans! We've never been slaves to anyone!

We, like those believers in Jesus, are slaves to sin. We are slaves to our own narcissism, to our self-centeredness, our need for control, our victim mentality, the constant need to be right. We are slaves to sin.

And this sinfulness...this enslavement of our own narcissism has bound us. It has controlled us. It has ruled us in such a clever and sneaky way we have mistook it for freedom. That's how clever sin is! We are enslaved because we think we're autonomous. We're enslaved because we think it's all about us. We're enslaved because we have put ourselves at the center of the universe and demand that our neighbors act accordingly.

We are slaves to sin.

Grace in the text

Jesus, though, has a much different vision of freedom. Jesus has a vision of freedom that has nothing to do with autonomy and it has nothing to do with the self. But it has everything to do with Him. Freedom...true freedom...begins and ends with Jesus.

Freedom...true freedom...comes when we abide in the word of Jesus. Our NIV translates it hold to the teachings but I like the ESV. It says if you abide in my word. That word abide is good because it means to dwell in or endure....to reside in the word of Jesus...then we will know the truth and the truth will set us free.

To abide in Jesus means to dwell in his word. To be immersed in his word. To set us shop in his word...His word that comes to us and reveals to us a God who is *for us*. His word that comes to us and revels to us a God who gave His very son for us, to die for us, and to bring us *freedom*. To set us free from sin, from death, and from the devil. This is the word in which Jesus invites us to dwell. To sit in. And to be washed over by His incredible, grace-filled Word.

And when we do that, we find freedom...*true* freedom which liberates us from those things that our autonomous self can't even touch. The power of sin in our lives, that drives deep divided between one another. The power of death which rips away those whom we love. From the power of the devil who deceives us into thinking that we are self-made men and women who can and should trust in only ourselves.

Jesus frees us from these things. Jesus frees us from a world in which we have been fooled into thinking we are at the center of.

Jesus brings true freedom. Because Jesus and Jesus alone brings forgiveness. He and he alone brings eternal life. And he alone brings salvation.

True Freedom begins and ends with Jesus.

Grace in the World

And so, Jesus calls us this morning, to turn from our life that is all about self and turn to him. To live a life of repentance. What says I'm not the center of the universe more than having to say, each and every day, man...I blew it? But as we turn from our own ways and our own wisdom and turn to Jesus and his word, we find this freedom that we're all looking for.

This is the power of celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation together today. It's yet one more reminder for us about what this Christianity thing is all about. That is, it's not about you...and it's certainly not about me. It's about Jesus. Jesus alone who comes to bring His people freedom. Just as God sent Moses into Egypt to liberate those captive slaves, God sent Jesus to set us free too. To proclaim that our consciences no longer control us because we have been forgiven. To proclaim that we are free from those sins of our youth which still haunt us. To proclaim that we are free from the need to try and earn our ways into God's good graces. We. Are. Free. Because of Jesus.

Application

And the power of this freedom is that it allows us to shift our gaze from ourselves start looking outward to our neighbor. This is the kind of Christian life that Luther envisioned as he wrote his Small Catechism. In that small little book as Luther is explaining the 10 commandments he does something totally brilliant. While he explains what each commandment tells us not to do, he also explains what we are now free *to do*. So for instance in the 9th and 10th commandments that tell us we should not covet, Luther doesn't just say you should "fear and love God so that...."

But Luther says, "...but help him keep it...etc...."

You see what Luther helps us do? He helps us live in this freedom of Jesus by turning our gaze outward. Life is no longer about us and how we're doing...it's about our neighbor and how *he or she is doing*. It's no longer about making sure we have everything we want, but making sure our neighbor has everything she *needs*.

This may sound overwhelming at first because we have so many neighbors! There are so many people whose paths we cross every single day...how can we possibly care for each and every one of them? That's true, we can't attend to everyone that meet, every hour and every day. But that leads us to another important learning from the Reformation, an idea we talked about in Bible class a couple weeks ago. That is, the idea of 'vocation'.

Typically, when we think vocation we think 'job', but the idea is bigger than that. Our vocation is the place where God has put us on earth in order to love and serve our neighbors. So, we might be husband or wife. We might be son or daughter. We might be employee or employer. We might be customer, we might be customer service.

These are all vocations and these are all places where we have been placed in order to love those we encounter every single day. God has placed us in a position to pour into an employee. God has placed us in a position to get to know our barista and her story. God has placed us in a position to care for our children or grandchildren and make sure they grow up abiding in the word of Jesus.

These are our vocations. Every day opportunities to love and serve those we encounter day in and day out, as we continue to abide in the word of Jesus. That's true freedom. It's freedom *from* sin, death, and the devil but it's also freedom *for* love and service to our family, our friends, our neighbors.

The uncomfortable bush that I'm beating around is this:

The American say I have political freedom therefore I can and should assert my rights and fight for my rights.

But the follower of Jesus says, Christ has set me free therefore I am free to give up my rights in order to serve my neighbor.

I'm not knocking America....the freedom that we have is amazing. And we are blessed to have it. But the constitution doesn't define freedom. Jesus does. And Jesus says,

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"If you abide in my word" Jesus says, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free". This morning Jesus is calling us to freedom. Freedom that comes from only and always from Him. By His grace, through His grace, Christ has unchained us from the power of sin which no longer binds us. Amen.