

October 31, 2021  
John 8:31-36

Reformation Day  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Real Freedom”**

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

*“Go to jail. Go directly to jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect \$200.”*

Those are the most dreaded words a player can hear in Monopoly when the draw the card from either Chance or Community Chest that orders them to jail. It takes the player out of the game, watching from the corner while the other players work to buy properties and bankrupt their opponents. The jailed player still has their turn in rolling the dice, but unless one rolls doubles, they are doomed to remain behind “bars” in this ever-popular board game.

There is one way to avoid incarceration: receiving a “Get Out of Jail Free” card that a player can keep until they receive their sentence. Even if they draw the “go to jail” card, they can redeem the card that allows them to avoid jail and continue their quest for real estate domination. Freedom from jail is one of the best moments, almost equal to another player landing on your property with a hotel.

Freedom is not merely an important aspect of this board game; it is central to our human quest for liberation from bondage and oppression. Freedoms are guaranteed to citizens of democratic countries, enshrined in documents such as the American Bill of Rights or the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Being freed from the burdens of disease, debt, or depression is a moment of liberation that is a reason for celebration. Freedom can be a contentious and even controversial issue; many of the current disputes that are polarizing communities and families revolve around how different people and groups define “freedom.” According to American social philosopher Corliss Lamont, *“true freedom is the capacity for acting according to one’s true character, to be altogether one’s self, to be self-determined and not subject to outside coercion.”*

Freedom is at the heart of our celebration of the Reformation on this day when we remember Martin Luther’s posting of his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, better known as the *Ninety-Five Theses*, on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on the eve of the All Saints Day masses in 1517. Posting

notices on the church doors was a common practice at the time, and professors in the local university would often issue documents that invited other scholars to engage in discussions on various issues. Luther's ninety-five points of discussion centered on the practice of selling indulgences, which were a form of "get out of jail free cards" that promised forgiveness of sins and liberations from the sufferings of purgatory, which the people of 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe feared even more than going to jail. The Church at that time taught that a person would be punished after death for the sins they had accumulated in life, and this punishment was only partly eased by good works (like pilgrimages, prayers, or donations to charity), divine forgiveness, and absolution. The more an individual sinned, the greater the punishment that awaited them. Rather than being damned to hell after death, a person would go to purgatory, where they would suffer whatever punishment was required to wash off (or "purge") the stain of their sins until they were freed. One way that people could avoid some or all of their time in purgatory was through indulgences in which a person could, because of the church's "indulgence," satisfy more of the temporal punishment than otherwise would be the case. The most valuable of these decrees of forgiveness was a "plenary indulgence," which eliminated all satisfaction for sins committed until that time. It was understood that such plenary indulgences were under the sole purview of the pope as the successor of Peter, under Christ's promise to him in Matthew that *"you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church ... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* (Matthew 16:18-19). While plenary indulgences were first awarded to people who had committed exceptional acts of courage and devotion, the need for funds to build a new St. Peter's Basilica in Rome led Pope Sixtus IV to proclaim that plenary indulgences could be purchased not only for oneself but also for ones' dear, departed loved ones already suffering in purgatory. Sellers of indulgences spread out across Europe, one of the most successful being John Tetzel, who offered these documents of forgiveness that were sold and purchased often to the financial detriment of the oppressed and marginalized, who succumbed to Tetzel's slogan that *"as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."*

As an Augustinian friar and preacher in Wittenberg, Luther had dutifully instructed his congregation on the benefits of indulgences:

- "I once believed that the merits of Christ were actually given me through indulgences, and, proceeding with this foolish notion, I taught and preached to the people that, since indulgences were such valuable things, they should not

fail to treasure them, and should not consider them cheap or contemptible.” – Proceedings at Augsburg, 1518.

But Luther’s perspective on indulgences changed through his study of Scripture, especially Paul’s letter to the Romans and its teaching that “*the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’*” (1:17) and that “*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are not justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*” (3:23-24, 28). This proved to be a turning point in Luther’s life as well as the course of the history and mission of the Western Church:

- “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.” – quoted in *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* by Roland H. Bainton.

With this new understanding of forgiveness of sins as a free gift of God that is ours through baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, Luther saw the sale of indulgences as contradictory to the teachings of Holy Scripture. In order to begin a scholarly discussion on this practice, Luther posted the *Ninety-Five Theses* on October 31, 1517. There is no evidence that such a discussion ever took place, but the document changed the course of world history and is the event we celebrate on Reformation Day. Luther’s preaching and teaching would focus on the Word of God and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith; as he preached in a sermon on indulgences and grace in 1518:

- “It is a tremendous error when people imagine that they can make satisfaction for their sins, which God instead always forgives gratis out of immeasurable grace while desiring nothing for this [grace] except that one live well from then on. Whenever Christianity demands something further, it may and should set such a thing aside and not impose anything heavy or unbearable.”

As Luther would teach in the *Small Catechism*, a document that remains an integral part of Confirmation instruction in Lutheran churches, our Lord Jesus Christ “*has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” As we celebrate the Affirmation of Baptism on this Reformation Day, we rejoice that through Holy Baptism “*we too might walk in newness of life ... for whoever has died to sin is freed from sin*” (Romans 6:4-6).

Our true freedom that is rooted in our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of today’s Gospel lesson, in which Jesus teaches those who had believed in him that “*if you continue in my commandments, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*” (John 8:31-32). This “if/then” clause contains the conditions that is followed by three promises, all of which use terms that are distinctive in the Fourth Gospel. In the conditional phrase, “continue in” (*meno*) denotes a permanent relationship between Jesus’ listeners and his “word” (*logos*). All that Jesus promises depends on the listeners’ continuing relationship with Jesus’ word, as he is the very “*Word that became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*” (1:14). True disciples are those who faithfully receive Jesus’ Word, embrace it, and allow it to transform their lives (... *the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*” – 1 John 2:14). The three promises to those who abide in the Word that is Jesus Christ are each built around the word “truth” (*aletheia*). The liberating power of the truth is unknowable apart from being Jesus’ disciple, which in turn depends on one’s relationship to Jesus’ word. The truth and freedom that Jesus promises are not abstract principles, but like light and life are bound to the Word:

- “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” – 1:4-5.
- “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’” – 8:12.

The truth is the presence of God in Jesus; those who abide in his Word will know the truth through the one who has proclaimed that “*I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me.*” (14:6). Those who receive the truth revealed by Jesus and let it take root and mature in them will be set free; “*in order to be truly free, a person must first know what is true*” (Francis Martin & William M. Wright IV).

Jesus' teaching is met with resistance by the audience, even though they had been identified as those "*who had believed in him.*" In their desire to distance themselves from Jesus, these followers have begun the process of distancing themselves from their own history: "*We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?*" (8:33). While the people of Israel are indeed descendants of Abraham, heirs of God's covenant promise that "*I will make of you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:2-3), Israel's history had been characterized by periods of slavery and captivity, including their enslavement in Egypt and exile in Babylon. While the audience misunderstands their identity as the children of Abraham, on a deeper level they may be expressing a lack of awareness of their spiritual enslavement to the power of sin and their need for the freedom that Jesus offers.

- "The nationalistic pride found in v. 33 resembles the magnificent boast of Eleazar to the besieged Jews at Masada: 'Long ago we determined to be slaves to neither the Romans nor anyone else, save God.' But Jesus says that they are not free with the only freedom that concerns him, a freedom from sin. This is the freedom of the true descendant of Abraham, and is a freedom that can only come through the Son." – Raymond Brown.

Jesus addresses the two prongs of the audience's protest and misunderstanding. Freedom is a gift; one cannot lay claim to freedom by virtue of one's heritage. One's identity as slave or free is determined by what one does, not by who one claims to be; being a descendant of Abraham does not entitle one to a "get out of jail free" card:

- "Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'" – 8:34-36.

At the heart of sinful actions is the willing rejection of God, and this rejection separates a person from God. The resulting state of separation is aptly characterized as "slavery," because people are powerless to free themselves from it and reconcile themselves to God. If one recognizes Jesus' identity, that he is the Son of God, then true freedom is possible: "*This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.*" (6:40). Jesus did not come to bring political liberation from the Romans, but freedom in its most profound sense: freedom from sin, which alienates us from God.

*“As the Son who remains eternally with the Father, Jesus is able to free all people enslaved to sin who, as slaves, cannot free themselves.”* (Martin & Wright).

Reformation Day is an occasion for us to remember and celebrate our Lutheran heritage, the foundations that were laid by our ancestors upon which the Lutheran Church is built and continues to live and serve. It is a foundation that is rooted in the truth that is ours in Jesus Christ, the truth that is in the Word of God that dwells among us, the Word that is our great heritage, the Word that is *“a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path”* (Psalm 119:105). It is the Word that is at the center of our life and witness, the Word that Luther translated into the language of the people so that *“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (Acts 2:11). It is the Word that proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ, and how through his death and resurrection we have been liberated from all that would enslave us and separate us from God’s steadfast love so that we might *“thank and praise, serve and obey him”* (Small Catechism) as we, *“being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”* (Luke 1:74).

- *“The soul can live without all things except the Word of God; without the Word of God nothing can help us. But when we have the Word we need nothing else, for in the Word we have enough food, joy, peace, light, art, justice, truth, wisdom, and all good things in abundance.”* – Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 1520.

The real freedom we experience in our abiding relationship with the Word of God is so important that it is at the center of the charge to parents and sponsors who bring their children to the waters of Holy Baptism: *“bring them to the word of God and the Holy Supper, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer, so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and strive for justice and peace.”* As Oliver and Julia affirm these baptismal promises in their Confirmation, they will be encouraged to continue to *“hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper [and] to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.”* For all who have been born anew to a living hope through water and the Word, true freedom comes in abiding in the Word that is our source of light and life, the Word that assures us that as God’s people we are free from all that would separate us from God’s love, the love that abides with us always *“so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete”* (John 15:11).

- “The word is always a word for others. Words need to be heard. When we give words to what we are living, these words need to be received and responded to ... The word brings together and calls us into community. When the flesh becomes word, our bodies become part of a body of people.” – Henri Nouwen.

True freedom cannot be found in a board game card, or on a piece of paper that makes promises it cannot deliver. True freedom comes through the one who is the Word of eternal life, the one who died and rose again so that we might be born anew to everlasting life. True freedom comes in abiding in the Word, the Word that truly makes us free.

Amen.