

October 30, 2022
John 8:31-36

Reformation Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“True Freedom”

“So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

A young person’s first year of college and university can be an exciting, pivotal moment in their lives, especially if they chose to go to school away from home. It’s the first time that many young people live on their own, taking responsibility for getting to class on time, cooking meals, doing laundry, and fulfilling tasks without encouragement or prodding from parents or other adults. It can be a great moment of freedom in their lives, but not every young person handles this new-found freedom well. I remember my first year of university very well; it was both exhilarating and terrifying, taking responsibility for many daily tasks and commitments and proving that I could live on my own. I was able to get up for class on time without my parents knocking on my door; I learned to do laundry with only a few minor disasters; and I managed to learn how to cope with living on my own fairly well. But not all my classmates were successful in handling their new-found freedom; for some, being away from parental controls resulted in a completely undisciplined life that had unfortunate consequences. Living in an on-campus residence that first year, there were many nights when loud music and parties went on to the early hours of the morning. Some students were frequently absent from class, while others were habitually late in handing in assignments. The freedom that seemed to be such a great moment in their lives became freedom that they could not handle on their own, and many of my classmates did not survive the first year.

Freedom is an ideal that we hold in high esteem; it is the bedrock of our understanding of human rights and is at the heart of the governing documents of many nations. In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms codifies the freedoms that are to be enjoyed by all Canadians, and any effort to restrict freedoms can be met with harsh resistance. But freedom is not to be confused with selfishness or narcissism; freedom is never a matter of doing what we want no matter how it might affect others, because freedom is always tempered with our responsibility to ourselves and to others. True freedom comes in realizing that freedom is a gift that must be used with great care, lest freedom turn into something that hurts both ourselves and those among whom we live.

Freedom is at the heart of Israel's self-identity that is remembered each year at Passover, the annual commemoration of the liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. When the Lord commands Moses to go to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh let God's people go free, the Lord also commands Moses that "*this shall be a sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.*" (Exodus 3:12). When Moses obediently goes to Egypt and leads the people of Israel out of bondage into freedom, he brings them back to Mount Sinai where the Lord once again addresses him:

- "Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. There are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'" – Exodus 19:3-6.

It is on this mountain that the Lord gives Moses and the people of Israel the *Torah*, God's "teaching" or "instruction" on how they are to live as God's holy people. They have experienced liberation but have no experience on how they are to live as a free people, no longer subject to the harsh bondage and persecution they experienced under the Egyptians. The Torah governs every aspect of their lives, providing guidelines that will allow them to experience their freedom without falling into the trap of selfishness and anarchy. Each of the commandments of the Torah are lived in the knowledge that they have been given to Israel by "*the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*" (Exodus 20:2). Freedom for Israel was to be experienced within a relation with God who makes true freedom possible.

Freedom is at the heart of God's Word in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament, and freedom is what we celebrate as Lutherans on this Reformation Sunday, in which we hear the words of Paul that "*we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*" (Romans 3:28). It was through his reading of Paul's words that Martin Luther experienced liberation from his personal fear of God's wrath when he understood that we are made right with God not through our own efforts but solely through God's gracious, loving act of liberating us from the bondage of sin through our baptism into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. When Luther read Paul's words in the first chapter of Romans that the

Gospel of Jesus Christ is “*the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’*” (Romans 1:17), he experienced a moment of profound liberation that changed the course of his life and preaching that led to his challenging the teaching of the church that held that salvation was something that could be purchased or earned by one’s own works:

- “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 reborn and to have gone through open gates to 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.”

We celebrate Luther’s teaching and legacy on this Reformation Sunday, the day that commemorates Luther’s posting of his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. We celebrate our Lutheran heritage that is rooted in our understanding of God’s gracious love, on how God in 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.*” (*Small Catechism*). We celebrate our freedom from anything that would separate us from God’s love, anything that would deny us the abundant life that is God’s Will for every person, and any force in heaven and on earth that would try to draw us away from God’s loving presence. We celebrate the good news that “*a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none*” (*The Freedom of a Christian*).

But Christian freedom is not to be confused with a self-centred freedom that pursues one’s own wants and desires without regard to others; at the same time, Luther also teaches that “*a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*” Our freedom is rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ, who freely surrendered his divine powers so that he might liberate us from our former bondage, and calls us to live out our freedom in the same way:

- “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human

likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” – Philippians 2:5-8.

As the people of Israel experienced true freedom through their walking in obedience with the Lord’s teachings as revealed in the Torah, those who walk with our Lord Jesus Christ know that true freedom is experienced when they live according to his teaching in today’s Gospel lesson that *“if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* (John 8:31). Jesus’ words are addressed not to a hostile audience but *“to the Jews who had believed in him,”* those who were among his people who became his followers. It is a teaching that is centred on an “if” clause (*“if you continue in my word”*) followed by three *apodoses* that introduce the promises that result (*“you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”*). The key word in this sentence is *meno* (abide, continue), which denotes a permanent relationship between Jesus’ listeners and his word. All that Jesus promises depends on the listener’s continuing relationship with Jesus’ word. Those who want to become Jesus’ disciples *“must remain in Jesus and make room for Jesus’ words [to] govern their actions, because the Word of God speaks the words of God. Jesus embodies, reveals, and teaches God’s word.”* (Judith Jones).

The three promises that result from abiding in Jesus’ word are each built around the word “truth” (*aletheia*) and are inextricable intertwined. 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 ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” – John 1:4-5, 9.
- “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” – John 8:12.

The truth is the presence of God in Jesus; it is this truth that is the source of freedom in Christ. “Freedom” (*eleuthero*) can be interpreted in a variety of contexts in Jewish tradition, its root context being the exodus to freedom out of slavery in Egypt. Jesus’ teaching suggests a reinterpretation of the exodus tradition through the lens of the truth of God in Jesus Christ.

- “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.

Jesus’ reinterpretation of freedom evokes resistance from his listeners, who rebut his words by appealing to their heritage as descendants of Abraham: “*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). In their desire to distance themselves from Jesus’ teaching, these would-be followers appear to be desiring to distance themselves from their own history, not only their centuries of slavery in Egypt but their enslavement in Babylonia following the conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Confident of their heritage and identity as descendants of Abraham, “*they are sure that they are already free*” (Jones) and have no need of the freedom of which Jesus speaks.

Jesus addresses the two prongs of his audience’s protest: freedom and their descent from Abraham. He begins his response with the phrase “*very truly, I tell you,*” which in the Fourth Gospel marks the introduction of a new teaching (“*Very truth, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.*” – 5:24). True freedom is a gift; one cannot lay claim to freedom by virtue of one’s heritage, since one’s identity as slave or free is determined by what one does, not by whom one claims to be. Jesus challenges their claim to their Abrahamic heritage by pointing to their actions, that “*everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin*” (8:34). Because they have followed their own desires instead of God’s Word, they have become slaves to sin; as John the Baptist had warned those who made a similar claim, “*do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*” (Luke 3:8). Freedom from the bondage to sin and death comes through recognizing the truth of Jesus’ identity, that he is the Son of God (“*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). Only the Son can liberate us from our slavery to sin, for “*if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*” (8:36).

- “From Jesus’ perspective, the critical focus is to be free from the constraint of sin. Sin enslaves the perpetrator and displaces them from the household of God ... The clear implication is this: to follow Jesus is to know truth, freedom, and connection to God. We see this reaffirmed in John 14:6: ‘I am the way, the

truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” – Kyle Brooks.

Freedom is truly at the heart of the Gospel message; but this is not a freedom that is to be squandered or misused for our own selfish desires or ambitions, because it is a freedom that is rooted in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. True freedom is experienced in the relationship God establishes with us in Holy Baptism, in which *“by water and the word we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ. Living with Christ and in the communion of saints, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). We are called to abide in the true freedom that is ours in God’s Holy Word, which is the basis for our new life in freedom, a freedom that is expressed in love, not in isolation but in our life together:

- “We find freedom in service, in yielding our lives to the divinely demanded righteousness of love of God and neighbour ... being freed from self-seeking, they make possible for both the self and others the life that is assured by God.” – Geoffrey Bromiley.

True freedom is experienced in relationship with the Word of God that is present among us in Jesus Christ, freedom that is lived in the community of God’s people, and freedom that exists not for the fulfillment of our own wants and desires but in serving all people in the name of the one who makes our freedom possible. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul teaches that it is *“for freedom [that] Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* (Galatians 5:1). Because Christ has set us free, we are to take a firm stand in the freedom we have been given. Because Christ has delivered the Galatians from slavery, they should never, under any circumstances, tolerate being subjected to it again (*“Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?”* – 4:9). Paul warns his readers not to allow their freedom in Christ to become a basis for the hostile power of the “flesh” (*sarx*), the sinful power resident in human existence that opposes God: *“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”* (5:13). Paul declares that the Torah finds its central meaning in a single verse: *“you shall love your neighbour as yourself”* (5:14; Leviticus 19:18). Insofar as the Galatians walk according to the Spirit, they will not allow the Flesh, their own selfish desires, to pervert Christ’s gift of freedom. They will instead be conformed to Christ by becoming slaves of one another, following the example of our Lord Jesus

Christ. In this way, they will embody the meaning of love that “*does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” (1 Corinthians 13:5-7).

- “For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish.”
– Luther, *Two Kinds of Righteousness*.

Among the many lessons I learned in my first year of university, the most important may have been the proper use of the freedom I was experiencing. It was not merely a liberation from the expectations and obligations of life at home so that I could do whatever I desired but being responsible in the proper use of my freedom for the benefit of myself and others. We are called to freedom through our baptism as children of God, and freedom is our birthright as heirs of God’s promises; but this freedom is not ours to use for our own wants or desires, but true freedom that is to be lived in our abiding in Christ and in the community of Christ’s people. It is a freedom that is to be used responsibly so that we may live the abundant life our Lord desires for us and so that all might experience the freedom that we receive through Christ’s death and resurrection. True freedom is experienced in our recognition that “*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all without reserve and spread God’s liberating word.*” (ELW Hymn 729).

Amen.