

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
October 28, 2018 Reformation Sunday John 8:31-36

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

This week I attended a pre-retirement workshop with other pastors from our synod. Don't worry, I have many, many years before retirement, but it's recommended when we're over 50 and I'm sure I'll need to attend again before that mysterious season of life arrives.

At the beginning of the workshop we were asked to talk with the people at our tables about two questions. What are your dreams for retirement? And what are you anxious about? You might guess the typical answers to the first question. Many of us wanted to travel. We want to be able to see our grandchildren and go places we've never been before. Basically, we want to be able to come and go as we please. We're looking forward to a new kind of freedom.

Our responses to the second question were also not too surprising. We worry about having enough money to live comfortably and to do the travelling we want to do. We worry about our health as we age and whether we will have the kind of freedom we're looking forward to enjoying.

We hear a lot about freedom here in the U.S. We are proud to be a place where our freedoms have been won and protected over these 250-some years. Initially this country won its freedom from the powers and principalities of another nation. We gained our independence! That's what freedom meant to our founding fathers and mothers.

When Jesus told his Jewish followers that he would make them free they were confused saying, "We have never been slaves to anyone." Did they forget about their ancestor's slavery in Egypt for 400 years? They told the story of the Exodus every year at Passover and every week at their Sabbath meals. At the time of Jesus the Jews lived under Roman rule, maybe not as slaves, exactly, but certainly not an independent nation.

It is difficult to consider what freedom means if we cannot name how we are enslaved.

On Wednesday evening at worship, I asked our worshipers to discuss this question with one another. "How do you feel enslaved in your life?" If we think about it, we are really not as free or independent as we might claim to be. We are all responsible and connected to others in a variety of ways.

Some of our worshipers talked about how the need to work could sometimes feel like we are slaves to our jobs. Even when we really enjoy our work, there are parts that are stressful or tedious. There's a reason our time off from work is called "vacation". We want to vacate, to escape the confines of our everyday life. We want to forget about deadlines and paperwork and maybe even our coworkers for a while. We want some freedom.

Some of our worshipers on Wednesday talked about other ways they feel enslaved. The world seems to place expectations on us. And we often place heavy expectations on ourselves. If we are questioning whether we are good enough, handsome or pretty enough, or rich enough, then we are enslaved to expectations of one kind or another.

Our founding father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, understood this feeling of enslavement, but he felt it from God. For a time Martin never felt he was a good enough Christian or worthy of God's love. He initially saw God's laws as the power that held him captive. He could never achieve the kind of perfection he thought God wanted from him.

It was in passages like the ones we heard today that Martin eventually woke up to the realization that it was not God or God's law that enslaved him it was the power of sin. Luther would come to write a simple, yet important definition for sin. Sin is the turning in on one's self.

Sometimes sin entices us see ourselves with too much importance and sometimes sin overpowers us into thinking too little of ourselves.

Jesus said in today's gospel text, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." The fact is that sin is a real power in this life. We do need to think about ourselves—God gave us instincts for our protection and to care for our daily needs. But we all know that it doesn't take much to move from self-care to acting in ways that place the value of ourselves over or under the value of others. And when we swing toward either of those we are drawn to commit the kind of sins that Jesus wants to free us from.

Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This truth levels the playing field. We are all justified, or brought into relationship with God, by "God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

God claims us in the waters of baptism as beautiful, perfect, and precious children. God even gifts us with the faith we need to receive God's love and acceptance.

That changes everything when it comes to our understanding of freedom! Jesus Christ frees us FROM the power of sin that causes us to turn in on ourselves. But that's not the end! Jesus frees us FOR a life that looks out to the world to share the love of God and this gift of freedom with others.

We are free to see our interests and talents as gifts that God has given us to share with others. We are free to take the experiences of our past—both the good and the difficult—and care for others who are going through something similar. We are free to see ourselves as beautiful and beloved so that we can give that same message to those who need to hear God's word of grace.

We are free to live into the future, trusting that God will provide whatever we need –and that we can continue to serve our neighbors not matter our age or abilities.

We are free because Jesus has set us free FROM the power of sin and freed us FOR loving and serving our neighbors with the love we have received from God.

As much as we strive to earn our way through the structures of this life, when we live in the freedom of Christ we realize that our job does not define our worth. We are free to do our work with gratitude for the opportunity and the abilities we have from God.

Luther once said that a shoemaker is not a Christian shoemaker because he puts little crosses on his shoes. He is a Christian shoemaker by making good shoes! When our occupations become avenues to serve the neighbor—by creating a quality product, or giving good service to our customers, or supporting our coworkers so that THEY can do their best work—we are free to find joy in that work.

On this Reformation Sunday, we remember that it was God's action that brought Martin Luther and the other reformers into the right place at the right time to proclaim the promise of God's grace and mercy. When they heard and received this good news by faith, they were freed to share it and become a part of God's work to bring new life to the church and to the lives of those who have learned from them over the centuries.

God is still about the work of reforming people and the church so that all who believe and follow Christ will experience the freedom that only comes from our loving, gracious God. May we receive this word of freedom today and carry it into a world in need of this gift.

Thanks be to God! Amen