

**October 25      John 8:31-36      REFORMATION DAY!**

**Nothing can my sin erase  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!  
Naught of works, 'tis all of grace—  
Nothing but the blood**

**This is all my hope and peace—  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!  
This is all my righteousness—  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!**

Today is Reformation Day in our church calendar. It is the perfect day for us to talk about Freedom. As this current election closes in, we are blessed to have the freedom to cast a vote. We are free to vote for the person we would like to be our leader. But the sad truth is, in this country, and in many others, there are people who are free when it comes to their country, but slaves when it comes to their souls.

Our Gospel lesson today tells us about the most important freedom, spiritual freedom.

Once again Jesus is surrounded by a large group of people who are challenging His authority. These people were slaves. They were slaves not only to the Roman authorities, but more importantly, they were slaves to their sin. They were slaves to their traditions. They were slaves to their own empty self-righteousness. In our reading, we hear Jesus give these spiritual slaves the key to loosen the chains that bind them.

**"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

This was the simple truth, but the trouble is, it was too simple. It was too much for these Pharisees, these bigshots in the Jewish faith to accept that Jesus was the answer. That Jesus was the way the truth and the life. It was too much for them to admit that they; the crowd; the self-righteous; the pure-blooded Jews; were not themselves, the answer. Their response to Jesus was one rooted in denial.

**"They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"**

If it weren't so sad, it would be funny. Here the Jews are denying they have ever been slaves. They denied the reality of the Roman oppression. They denied the very history of their people who had been slaves in Egypt and Babylonia. But most of all, they denied their own slavery to sin. They blindly tried to believe that their own choices, their own actions, their own merit could save them.

They were in denial because the truth hurts. Yes, it is Good News that we are truly free through the cross of Christ. But, in order to reach that Good News, we have to accept the reality, that without the cross, we would be truly bound. Truly condemned. Truly hopeless. The truth requires us to venture into a very dark place.

By the fifteenth century the church had become a massive institution of power. The message of the Gospel had become polluted. The church was teaching salvation by doing good works. Salvation was for sale. In order to raise money, the church was selling admission to heaven, even for dead relatives. It wasn't by faith at all. Silver and gold got you into the heaven. In those dark days, God raised up a hero of the faith to stand against the powers of the empire, and the most powerful institution on the planet, to preach sola fide. Saved by faith alone. That man's name was Martin Luther.

He is a man who God used to change our understanding of God's Word. He tenaciously pursued the truth. He renewed the proclamation of the Gospel. He came to this by way of fear. Martin Luther, like the Pharisees did all the right things. He devoted himself to the study of God's Word. He joined a monastic order. He became a model monk. He made trips to adore the holy relics. By human standards, he had earned every right to feel secure, to feel free, maybe even to be a little smug.

The church at the time even told him so. They freely pointed him to all the rules he followed. They lauded him for the life he chose. They told him to find peace because of who he was and what he did. Martin Luther should have been relaxed, and very comfortable with himself. But he wasn't. In all these things that he did, Luther realized he was not free. In fact, he was as bound, as hopeless, as despairing as he ever was. As he tried even harder; he fell even shorter. There would never be enough holy relics to see to ease his heart. His vows would never be kept perfectly enough to rest his soul. There would never be enough study to ease his worry. He could never deny himself enough pleasures to cleanse his body. There would never be enough time to confess all his sins.

Taught to rely on his own works for his freedom; he found it was never enough. His sin was like quicksand. The harder he fought with his own strength, the deeper he sank. The more he tried to rely on himself, the tighter he could feel Satan's grip on his soul. Luther was tortured by his own conscience. He was paralyzed by his own sins. He found himself in the predicament all people eventually find themselves in when forced to confront the reality of God's Holiness, and the reality of our own frailty.

We all have to face the truth. The plain truth. The unavoidable truth. God has standards we cannot attain. God has rules we cannot follow. God has demands we cannot meet. Finding himself in this desperate position, the Holy Spirit led Luther to seek the truth. The plain truth of God's Word ultimately shook Martin Luther to the core and brought him to saving faith in Jesus Christ. On this point, I quote from a letter by Dr. Paul Luther, the reformer's youngest son: **"In the year 1544, my late dearest father, in the presence of us all, narrated the whole story of his journey to Rome. He acknowledged with great joy that, in that city, through the Spirit of Jesus Christ, he had come into the knowledge of the truth of the everlasting gospel. It happened this way. As he repeated his prayers on the Lateran staircase, the words of the prophet Habakkuk came suddenly to his mind, 'The just shall live by faith.' Thereupon he ceased his prayers, returned to Wittenberg, and took this as the chief foundation of all his doctrine."**

From that unlikely beginning came the Protestant Reformation. And with it the battle-cry sola fide, "by faith alone."

**Faith alone!** Not by works of the law.

**Faith alone!** Not by obedience to the Church.

**Faith alone!** Not by human righteousness.

**Faith alone!** Not by good intentions.

**Faith alone!** Not by penance or almsgiving.

**Faith alone!** Plus nothing and minus nothing!

God gave Luther the courage to look past the man-made rules. Past the human invented tradition. Past the flawed teachings of much of the church to see what God really had to say to sinners in His Word. In the Bible, Luther sought and found the truth. The truth about a different kind of righteousness. A righteousness that comes not from us. Not from our doing the right things. Not from being the right kind of person. Luther rediscovered a righteousness that comes from faith. A righteousness that comes through Christ. A righteousness that comes through Jesus suffering and death on the cross. There was joy in discovering that the simple truth that Jesus suffered and died to pay the price we cannot pay. He righted the wrongs we cannot right. He cleansed the stains on our souls we cannot clean.

It was in God's Word that Martin Luther looked up from the shadow of the valley of death and felt the warm light of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus' Salvation, upon his face. He discovered freedom. The true freedom of knowing righteousness, purity, and a holiness that comes from God to us through Jesus Christ. Imagine hearing these words of truth for the first time. Imagine the salve the words were to a wounded soul.

**"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."**

It is impossible to achieve victory over sin merely by striving to do things. All salvation is by God's grace. It is unmerited divine help that even causes us to have a desire to want to seek the Lord. A desire to enquire about Christ and then have the ability to live a life pleasing to Him. If you know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, then it is by God's grace alone. Without Him there would be no drawing to Christ or ability to respond to the gospel and live it out.

God is willing and wanting to give us all grace. The Holy Spirit moved the apostle Paul to write about this powerful truth, **"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."**

A life connected to the person and work of Jesus Christ is a meaningful life. It's a life freed by grace.

"Grace" means that we are justified freely by God's own hand, and nothing done by us.

Romans 11:6 says, **"And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace."**

Ephesians 2:8-10 says, **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."**

F.F. Bruce points out, **"These passages are the watchword for the reformation theology: 'By grace alone, through faith alone, to God alone be the glory.'"**

We have free forgiveness through Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross and thus we have reconciliation to a holy God.

The same freedom that sent Martin Luther's soul soaring is the same freedom we have in the Gospel here today. It is a message that is still alive, that is still relevant, that we still need to hear week after week, day after day, hour after hour. Satan is still as hard at work as he ever has been. Satan is still trying to grab our ankles and pull us into the quicksand of self-righteousness, societal expectations, and self-reliance. We have been freed from Satan's hellish shackles, and yet, unwittingly, and unknowingly, we try to reach down and try to fasten them on once again. Too often we look to our own righteousness and are satisfied to trade truth for shallow denial.

We lean on ourselves instead of the truth. It is too easy to pat ourselves on the back for all the great things we've done. To shower praises on us and those like us. Hold so fast to our own deeds that we look down upon others who don't act like us, who we don't think are as good as us. All the while we play the fool, reaching out to grasp the fleeting mist of our own works, and neglect the solid strong substance of the cross.

We bind ourselves with societal expectations. We demand a God that conforms to our ideas, not one that transforms our lives. We desire gratification, not grace. We chase after moral relativity, not divine revelation. We demand God fit into our schedule, not that our scheduled fit his plan. We want God to occupy no more than 60 minutes every week.

Too often we would rather be comfortable than free. Denial is just as easy for us as it was for the people in Jesus' day. We choose to think that we don't really need Christ. We place our hope in our heritage instead of our faith. We hold up the things of this world, and we hide our faith in Christ, even from people who need to know Him. This list could go on and on. And we should fall deeper and deeper into despair. So today, as every day, we have a reason to celebrate. We celebrate the truth that we are free. Free by Christ, Free through Christ, Free in Christ. The same rays of the Gospel light that shone on Martin Luther's troubled faith are the same rays of hope and life that warms our hearts and souls today. We are lifted out the pit, we are rescued from the fires of hell, we are released from the chains of darkness because we have been made new in Christ. Our death sentence overturned. Our heavy souls made light. Our guilt removed. Christ has made us new. Christ has made us worthy. Christ has made us free.

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