

John 8:31-36 | **Freedom in the Word of Truth**

Jeremiah 31:31-34 / Psalm 46 / Romans 3:19-28 / John 8:31-36

Preached on Reformation Sunday, 27 October 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Heavenly Father, send us your Holy Spirit so that we may find freedom in the truth, as we abide in your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Freedom

What is it that makes a life free? What does someone experiencing full freedom look like?

Things like going on holidays might come to mind, or having excellent health – being able to move easily and breathe deeply. We can perhaps think also of financial freedom, having enough resources to do the things you want to do.

These ideas of freedom are not just matters of idle interest. How we see freedom steers us in a particular direction, leads us to make definite decisions. So, when our Lord Jesus today challenges our vision of freedom, we need to listen closely, and think about what our lives can look like as we hear Jesus' teaching on true freedom.

This is what we heard:

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and

you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

³³ They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

Just like we can have, the Jews Jesus is speaking to have a mistaken, or incomplete, view of freedom. For them, freedom seems to be especially political, a matter of not being enslaved to someone, like a foreign power.

But Jesus responds in powerful words that have shaped Christian preaching ever since: *“Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”*

Slavery is not simply a reality for people in other countries, or in other times through history, but a reality for you, today. We confess as much, that we are born into bondage, in servitude, in slavery to sin. We can't escape sin. It naturally becomes our master, and holds us in its grip. The sins we commit are not just mistakes, but enslaving thoughts and actions. Even the things that we mistakenly think will free us, can lead us down the path of slavery. As someone once put it, *‘a man's worst difficulties begin when he is able to do as he likes’*.

Son sets you free

Those counterfeit versions of freedom seem to be what Jesus then refers to when he says:

³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

People who are enslaved to sin might do their best to seek a place of freedom, a place in the household of God. But here Jesus says that their efforts will be in vain. There is no permanent place for a slave.

But then he here proclaims the good news, the Gospel that today on Reformation Sunday we give thanks for. That there is a path out of our slavery to sin. One path, one Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has taken the path of suffering and shame and death on your behalf, to bring you freedom from the sins that had mastered you.

As the very Son of God, his place in the house of God is assured. And when He sets you free, He gives you His place in the house, in your Father's house. As we heard in our reading from Jeremiah, this is, then, a new covenant, a new kind of promise. That by the blood of Christ, we do not live in slavish fear of being thrown out of the house, but in joy can draw near to our loving heavenly Father, and live in the freedom of our status as sons of God.

Good Conscience

That's what Jesus means when he says "*if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*" Truly free. With a freedom that is greater than all of the other versions of freedom that vie for our attention.

Freedom from sin, freedom from slavery to sin, freedom from death, freedom from Satan's powers, freedom to serve God with a pure heart.

Of course, financial freedom sounds nice too, freedom from illness and injury. But God out of love gives you the deeper gift of a good conscience, by forgiving you your sins by grace, through faith, in Christ alone.

Consider a window in a house. The dirtier it is, the more marred it is, the less light comes into a room through it, and also the more distorted is the view out through the dirty window. But the clearer and cleaner the window, the more the light floods in through it and the clearer is the view of the outside world.

That's a picture of what a good conscience, set free by the Son, looks like in our own lives. An unclean conscience, a bad conscience, does not let the light of God shine our hearts, so that our perception of God and the world around is darkened and distorted. We can lash out in strange ways. But a clear conscience, your conscience, washed by the blood of Christ Jesus and forgiven again today, lets the light of God shine into our hearts, so that we see the goodness of God and his world more clearly. With light comes sight.

And this, our Lord proclaims, is true freedom, and worth ordering your whole lives around in order to persevere in this freedom, in this gift. That's not to say that financial or health issues won't come our way, but that their power is limited. Consider St Paul himself, beaten and imprisoned with Silas, as we can read about in Acts 16. At the moment when we might think there were enslaved in prison, they could pray and sing hymns to God. For they were free. Or think about Martin Luther's famous hymn. *"Take they our life, Goods, fame, child and wife: Though these all be gone, Yet have our foes not won; The kingdom our remaineth."*

Our place in the kingdom. *"if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."*

Delighting in the Word

Freedom comes through Christ. But in our reading, Christ also gives a sort of formula for this freedom, a way of receiving this freedom.

*"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples,
32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you
free."*

Continuing in the word, or abiding, remaining. This is actually the word that Jesus uses also in verse 35 where he literally says: *Now the slave does not abide in the house to the age/forever; the Son abides to the age/forever.*

So just as the Son abides, continues, remains, so too Jesus calls us to abide, continue, remain in his Word. In that way, we will truly be his disciples, we will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Christian freedom then, comes not despite the Word of God, but by abiding in the Word of God.

This is especially pertinent as we commemorate Martin Luther and the Reformation. Sometimes Luther is falsely praised as someone who had the courage to do what he wanted in his heart, no matter what the obstacles. But this is close to the opposite of what Luther cherished. He didn't do what was in his heart, he didn't fight for freedom so that he could find out his own truth. Instead, he knew that his only hope of freedom was in the truth of God's Word. He knew that his freedom came not by abiding in his own desires, nor by abiding in the words of human beings, influential people who gave their own opinions as if they were God's. Instead, he knew his freedom was in submitting his conscience to God's Word.

This is why Luther, and we Lutherans, are often concerned with right teaching and to some people can seem to focus too much on doctrine. Of course people can be unloving in their zeal for truth. But it's only in the truth, abiding in God's liberating Word, that we find freedom in Christ. Like Luther, we don't put our trust in fads or popular opinions or speculations. These might make us feel good for a little while, but it is only God's truth that sets us free, so that we can be free indeed.

Conclusion

In our reading from Jeremiah we heard that the Lord promised to make a new covenant, the only time in the whole Old Testament that that phrase occurs.

No longer will the law be an external force, but it will become an internal power, written on our hearts. No longer will people strive to know the LORD, for already they will know him. How will they know him? Because God *will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.*

I've already mentioned Martin Luther, but one of the other great Lutheran reformers was Philip Melancthon who said this: to know Christ is to know his benefits. Not to know about God, have information about him, but to receive his benefits, to be forgiven, to behold him face to face, to have access to his holy presence.

It is at the most climactic moment of Jesus' ministry that he again mentions this old words of Jeremiah, taking a cup of wine and saying "*This is my blood of the new covenant, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.*"

The blood of Christ, made present for us in our Holy Communion, is this very new covenant. Where sinners like us, receive a good conscience through the forgiveness of sins. And by receiving God's mercy, we come to know God, not as a tyrant, but as our loving heavenly Father. And, by abiding in the Word in this way, the Son sets us free, so that we are free indeed.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.