

The Festival of the Reformation • October 25, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 8:31-36

“Stewardship of Truth and Freedom” – Fall Stewardship Focus, Part 4

If you really want to keep a prisoner captive, I'm thinking that manacles would be a good way to go. If you've seen a pirate movie or anything set in a medieval dungeon, you've likely seen a set of these things. They're much more substantial than today's handcuffs – think heavy, leaden rings that clamp down over your forearms and wrists – and even more imposing. They restrict your movement, binding in such a way that it's difficult to even move your arms. Once the manacles have closed, the hope for any kind of freedom fades fast.

This weekend, as we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation, our attention turns to Jesus' words in our Gospel text from John 8. He speaks of “truth” and being “set free.” There's a lot of talk about such things in Scripture. Later on in John 18, Jesus says to Pontius Pilate, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” And Pilate replies, “What is truth?” It's not so much a question as it is a dismissive response – the same response that we hear in the world around us today. “There is no truth, no absolute,” seems to be a prominent attitude in our culture, one which proposes that you can believe whatever you want to believe. We might even start thinking the same way, if only to not have to think about the possibility that there are people who are **not** “of the truth.” Because if there's really truth, there must by definition be non-truth: falsehood, fakery, lies. And although it might seem easier to say that there is no truth – that every person can find his or her own way of living – such an attitude will ultimately disappoint. That system of belief puts the weight of the world on your shoulders, with no hope of it ever being lifted. How do you navigate the world around you if there is no truth? How are you not crushed by the harshness of life in an imperfect world? Believing that there is no truth is almost like throwing your arms into manacles which you'll never be able to unlock.

The faith that we confess as Lutheran Christians has an answer to Pilate's question. We can say with confidence that there is such a thing as truth – **the** Truth, even, which we hear in Col. 1:5 to be “the gospel,” the good news of God's love in Jesus. What is truth? That God loves you, that He has forgiven you through Jesus, and that He wants you to walk with Him. This is the message of the gospel, God's honest truth for you and me today. Walking in God's Word, we hear the truth that sets us free.

We all need freedom. All of us are aware of unhealthy – or just plain harmful – things, thoughts, and themes in our lives that we just can't seem to leave behind. Our best efforts seem to fall short and we end up stuck back in the same ruts as before. You might feel like you're chained to the failings of the past, that you are a captive in a hopeless life. You might even now be starting to feel the heaviness of this imprisonment weighing you down, as if invisible but massive metal manacles are keeping you from even being able to move your arms. That's the reality of our imperfect and fallen world, which each and every human being experiences in life. And **God offers us all freedom through His Son, the freedom of forgiveness and hope.** He unlocks the manacles that bind us and takes hold of weak arms that have wearied from carrying their weight. He lifts us up and gives us strength. We need that strength, too, for even though God frees us from our captivity to sin, He does not mean to set us free from the world. But because of God's self-giving love, we can walk with Him in hope, even through the midst of the struggles of this life.

In this month's issue of The Lutheran Witness magazine, you'll find an article that might expand your understanding of the beloved hymn, “A Mighty Fortress,” a hymn which we will be singing this weekend along with other Lutherans around the world. At first hearing, this exposition of Psalm 46 might sound like a Christian battle hymn with its images of sword, shield, armies, and the

like. Indeed, we people of the Church are called to be vigilant in this world which constantly attacks the gospel and denies its truth. But even more than that, “A Mighty Fortress” lifts up the truth of God’s love and the freedom we enjoy through Christ: **it is a hymn of comfort**. As you sing (with gusto!), look again at the lyrics, which serve as a powerful reminder that God stands for us in the battle against the forces of sin, death, and the devil. *“But now a champion comes to fight, whom God Himself elected. Ask who this may be: Lord of Hosts is he! Jesus Christ our Lord, God’s only son, adored. He holds the field victorious.”* Jesus wins the day for you and me, that we may walk with him both now and always.

For the Christian, freedom isn’t just a state of mind; it’s a state of being. When Jesus says “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” he means it. The freedom that Christ brings into our lives is a game-changer: it intends to **upend** our assumptions, to **reshape** our habits, and to **send** us out into the world as freed people. The struggles that we see and experience in life might remain before us, but since the Son has set us free, we are not bound to respond to those struggles in the same way as once did: the truth of the gospel changes minds and hearts, opening up new and previously unknown possibilities for action that share the love and freedom we know. Freedom in Christ, therefore, is not an end in and of itself. We’re not free just to “be free” all on our own. We’re drawn into a closer walk with the God who has set us free. And as we experience this freedom in our lives, the Holy Spirit guides our hands into service as stewards of all of God’s gifts.

As you may know, today marks the culmination of our fall stewardship focus. What does it mean, then, for us to be stewards of **truth** and **freedom**? Living in the truth of the gospel as a forgiven people, you and I have freed hands and freed lives. Over the past few weeks, we’ve considered how everything that we are, everything that we have, has been entrusted to us by our heavenly Father. As we look ahead to what comes next, the truth that we have come to know in Christ Jesus – the truth which sets us free – will guide our steps. Living freed lives, our vocations (as parent, farmer, executive, friend, etc.) become opportunities to make use of everything that God has given in service to the people around us. Our freed hands, unbound from the manacles of sin and our failings, become instruments of God’s grace in the places we live, work, and play.

Reformation Day celebrates the treasure of truth and freedom that God has given to the world. This is a treasure of unsurpassed value and one that knows no bounds, yet you can hold a reminder of it in your hands. God’s word of truth, given to us in Holy Scripture, is here to serve as your companion through life. Every day as you go out into work or school or home, facing the struggles and hardships of this world, you need only pick up a Bible and read God’s promise to remain, to abide with you, regardless of what the world might have us believe. Using your freed hands to turn the pages of Scripture, you can daily find the affirmation of God’s love and forgiveness in His Son, Jesus. Here, you have solid truth in a changing world.

This Reformation Day, we celebrate and take comfort in the truth that the Son has set us free – that we are free **indeed!**

Amen.