

One of the main reasons we celebrate the Reformation is the restoration of the truth of the Gospel, the good news concerning all that Jesus has done for us. Luther and the other reformers encountered considerable resistance in proclaiming this truth, but at the end of the day, God's truth wins out. Throughout the eighth chapter of St. John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking about who He is and why He has come. As He teaches, He encounters considerable pushback, and finally open hostility, from the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. He is the light of the world, and those who dwell in darkness, both then and now, shun the light, as it exposes their sin. In our Gospel reading this morning, we get a small section of this dialog. Despite the small size, though, an issue of enormous importance is addressed: our enslavement to sin and our only hope for true and lasting freedom. This is at the heart of the Gospel, the reason we celebrate the Reformation.

Immediately prior to where our Gospel reading begins, we hear, "As He (Jesus) was saying these things, many believed in Him." Jesus has been proclaiming the word, and the Holy Spirit has worked through that word to bring many to faith, to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah and Savior. It's a wonderful event! It's in response to this that Jesus says to the Jews who believe in Him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." In the first half of this statement, Jesus is laying out what it means to be His disciple, His follower, namely, that you abide, or remain, in His word. To follow Jesus, as the word itself says, is an ongoing reality. It isn't just a one-time even, a hoop that you jump through or a box that you check. To believe in Jesus, to follow Jesus, to be a disciple of Jesus, is to remain constantly in His word.

Why is it so essential to remain in this word of Jesus? As He says, by doing this, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." It's only through the word of God that we know the truth. And what is this truth? Rather, we should ask, "who" is this truth. The truth sets us free, and as Jesus says a few verses later, the Son sets us free. The Truth is the Son, Jesus Himself. He elsewhere says quite plainly that He is "the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus is the truth. And so, by Jesus' own words, the way to know Him is by abiding in His word. You will not know Jesus better by admiring a sunset or relaxing in the woods or following your heart. It's the word that reveals Jesus, who He is and what He has done for you and what He desires for you. This was another of the key ideas in the Reformation – Sola Scriptura: Scripture – the word – alone. Traditions can be helpful, and human reason can assist understanding, but all these must be put underneath the word. It is the word that

proclaims to us that Jesus sets us free. It is through the word Jesus speaks to us that we abide in freedom.

The question that naturally comes from this teaching of Jesus is, “free from what, exactly?” That’s what the Jews want to know when they reply to Jesus, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” At first, this seems like a remarkably stupid question. These are the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and scribes and so forth. They are aware of their history, the 400 years of bondage in Egypt, the 70 years of exile in Babylon. And even those totally ignorant of their history can’t possibly miss the Roman soldiers everywhere in Jerusalem. No, the Jews are certainly not free.

So why would they say something so obviously false? Well, because they aren’t speaking about the outside world, the physical. They’re claiming that they are free on the inside, in their hearts. They say that, because they are descended from Abraham, they are free in a spiritual sense. They might be ruled by Egyptians or Babylonians or Romans, but their hearts, their minds, their wills are free. They will choose their fate, they will chart their course, they will secure their eternal home. They don’t need anyone to free them. They are their own people.

Does that sound familiar? The idea of being free on the inside, free to be whatever you want to be and do whatever you want to do, free to make whatever you want of your life? We are just as guilty, probably even more so, of this prideful individualism than these Jews. This drive to affirm the individual, to let people be who they claim that they are, to never “oppress” anyone, it’s all throughout our society. This is the idea at the root of the transgender movement, for instance. People are “free” to define their sexuality, regardless of the obvious reality of their biology, and you’re a hateful bigot if you say otherwise. Or take the “redefinition,” so-called, of marriage. God establishes marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman for companionship and the raising of godly children. The resulting families are then the basic building block of human society. Be we foolishly think that we’re “free” to redefine marriage, make it about emotion and feelings and our corrupted idea of “love,” able to be formed and dissolved at will, and we say this is “freeing,” totally ignoring all the societal ills that follow.

Even in the Church, we make this false notion of individual freedom the ultimate good, over and above God’s word. Feelings become the standard and rule, not the Holy Scriptures. False teachings come in, not at random, but because they make people feel good. And then we as the Church don’t rebuke said false teachings because we don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. We strive to appeal

to the individual and his individual tastes, because to speak of the Church as something greater that you become a part of, and conform to, sounds like the opposite of freedom to us. Rather than abide in God's word, obeying His commandments and trusting His promises, we abide in outward unity and good feelings, failing to realize that none of that can set us free from our bondage of our hearts and minds to sin and death.

This failure to realize the truth, both the Truth who is the Son and the truth of His words to us, is why Jesus replies as He does. "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." These Jews claim that they are free, and so Jesus challenges them to show their freedom. If their hearts and minds and wills are truly their own, then they should simply stop sinning. Because, after all, if they love God as they say they do, then surely they don't desire to sin against God. So if they are free to truly do whatever they will, then stop sinning. Easy, right? Or actually... impossible! They can't stop sinning, even if they want to. They are enslaved.

The same goes for us today. If you truly can be whoever you want to be and do whatever you want to do, then prove it. Live perfectly. Don't suffer. Have everyone like you. And especially, be good, because only a sociopath would want to be evil, right? Or perhaps even more than this, if you are free, don't die. Live forever, and while you're at it, keep your loved ones from dying, too. Our mortality, perhaps more than anything else, shows that we are enslaved, subject to forces beyond our control. No amount of denial, or anger, or reason can change this or throw off the chains which bind you to the grave. Apart from Christ, you and I are slaves to sin and death.

Yet we are not doomed to be apart from Christ. In His word, He gives us great comfort: "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever." Jesus speaks of His great and lasting victory. He would appear, on Good Friday, to be bound to death as we are, dying on the cross and being laid in the tomb. Yet it would not last. The grave was only a temporary stop for Him. Three days later, Jesus rose bodily, shattering the grave's chains, breaking down the gates of Hades. His eternal dwelling is not Sheol, but ruling and reigning at His Father's side, abiding in His house forever. Jesus is the Lord, truly free from sin and death, never to die again.

This victory doesn't remain with Christ, either. As He says, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus didn't die and rise for Himself, but for you and me. This freedom He grants as a gift, totally apart from our works or efforts. We're enslaved, hopelessly trapped, but He comes and with His might shatters the chains that bind us. By His grace and mercy, He washes us, cleanses us with His blood, and brings us into His house as free people.

Our freedom isn't freedom in the sense that we can just do whatever we want with no consequences. It is true, we can turn back to our sins. We can run back to our old slavemasters and clasp the irons back on our wrists. Scripture speaks of this as a dog returning to its own vomit. But the freedom the Son grants is so much greater! The freedom the Son grants is freedom from worry about tomorrow, because He is the God who is already there and who has established all our days before they even began. The freedom the Son grants is freedom from worrying about how we'll provide for ourselves, because He has reconciled us to the Father who has promised to give us our daily bread. The freedom the Son grants is freedom from worrying about what the world thinks about you, because you are loved by the Lord with a love that is eternal and unchanging. And especially, the freedom the Son grants is freedom from death. You have been joined to His death and resurrection in your Baptism, and so your life will not end. This body will fall asleep at some point, but the moment you close your eyes in death, your soul will be in paradise with Jesus Himself. You are blessed with eternal life, even right now, and not even the devil himself can take that gift of God away from you. Whatever might happen in this short life, an eternity of joy and peace in God's presence await all His beloved people. By His word, the Son has set you free, and so you are free indeed!

In the name of Jesus, amen.