

The Homily  
30 October 2011  
Reformation Day  
Grace Lutheran Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

John 8:31-36

To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 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?" Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family. But a Son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Slaves No More!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Jesus had the most difficult time with people who had been exposed to His teachings. This exposure was a blessing to many, but proved to be a cause of difficulty to others. John records an instance where Christ was preaching to the Jewish people who sort of believed what He was saying. But as He continued to explain things to them, the people grew increasingly hostile and mean spirited. What caused this change of attitude? What created this anger? Jesus told them that they would be slaves no more. That is the theme of today's message - slaves no more! I pray that God the Holy Spirit will open our hearts and minds to receive this reformation message.

An examination of Jewish history will cause one to truly wonder why the people objected to Jesus' teaching here. Yes, they were indeed Abraham's descendants as they insisted. But the experience of being Abraham's descendants was only part of their heritage. They were also the children of people who, due to disobedience, were consigned to wander forty years in the wilderness after God had mercifully freed them Egyptian slavery. They were the descendants of people who had been taken away captive into Babylonia, Persia, and Assyria in years gone by. So the idea of being slaves no more should not have annoyed them. But it did. In their human pride, they developed amnesia concerning these things.

At the time Christ spoke to them, they were not exactly free. The Roman Empire had conquered many nations including Judea and turned them into provinces of Rome. Although Jerusalem was the capital of the province, all real decisions had to be approved by Rome. This was the real problem. The Jewish people of Jesus' day had a set of expectations. They were expecting a military strongman to come and set them free from Roman domination. This was the false teaching they were reading into

the Scriptures concerning the coming Messiah.

Jesus was charismatic. He drew the crowds. But He didn't seem to be mustering the kind of power base that they felt would be necessary to overthrow the Roman governmental system. His teachings were O. K., but sometimes He would annoy the crowds. The religious leadership was particularly annoyed with this teaching of His. This is exactly what we are seeing in this text. No call to arms, no political rally point. Only more of this teaching. Only this time, He tells them that they are slaves, but that He through His teaching sets them free. This was not what the people had in mind.

Reformation Sunday, 2011. A special day within Lutheran circles particularly, and even within a broader Protestant community to some extent. We thank God for Martin Luther, for the reformers of the Church who sought to restore and preserve the truths of the Scripture to our day. But what is happening in our day? We have the Church on many levels. Ecumenical levels, denominational levels, and local levels. That which we see as the carpenter's Son preaching to unorganized crowds has now evolved into a highly structured corporate fixture in modern society. Many blessings have also come to the world through the growth and development of the Church. Missionaries have been sent forth into the far-flung regions of the globe. Seminaries and other religious schools have been established for the training of Church workers. Hospitals, orphanages, and other charitable institutions have been set up in the name of Christ. Then we also have the blessing of what we might call spin-off movements that can be attributed to the good influence of the Church in modern times and the reformation movement. Public education for all people including women is one of these spin-off blessings.

But to us, as well as to Jesus' original audience, the basic message causes us some distress. Jesus preached freedom. We might reply that this is an inappropriate topic for us. After all, are we not citizens of "the land of the free and the home of the brave?" We see ourselves as a free people who are slaves to no man. Like the Jews of Jesus day, our focus is misplaced.

Political freedom is not the focus of Christ's words. He is concerned about sin. Sin makes us slaves. How many times have we done something that was wrong, and, when confronted about it, lied about it? How many times have we said or done something that was wrong and then blamed someone else? The snowball effect of sin is truly a great and terrible slavemaster. The results of our sin are even more oppressive. Shame, guilt, pain, fear. These are not the emotions of God. They are the emotions of sin. These are the horrible feelings of thousands upon thousands of people. How many people walk around with a terrible burden of shame and guilt as a result of sin in their

lives? How many people are struggling with emotional pain and fear, all on account of sin?

Jesus is the Key that unlocks the slave house of sin. Jesus is the Liberator Who breaks down the stronghold of shame, fear, guilt, and pain. How does Jesus do this? He frees us through His teaching. One of the strongest ropes that ties us up is ignorance. Look briefly at history. One of the first things that all tyrants controls is information. Once information is controlled, the tyrant can restrict the knowledge of the people and thus turn them into slaves. Christ knows that the devil wants to keep us ignorant. The devil does not want people to know about the love of God. If they know a little bit about the love of God, the devil certainly does not want them to know much about it. The fact that Christ's suffering and death has paid in full the price for our freedom from sin. The fact that we are saved freely by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. The fact that we cannot and do not have to earn our way into God's favor. These facts bring great sorrow to the devil and his hordes. They absolutely do not want this knowledge to be spread. They opposed Christ when He sought to bring these facts to the people of His day. They oppose pastors and churches that seek to bring this message to light in 2011.

Here is the problem of the twenty-first century: As we celebrate the heritage of the Reformation, we find that we have the fanfare, the formalities and the festivals. But we lack something. What we lack is the freedom. We lack the freedom that comes with the teaching of Christ. We do not have the commitment to the old teachings that are the essence of the Reformation and indeed, Christianity itself. Although we carry the Christian heritage of the Reformation, and enjoy the fact of salvation. We still carry too much pain, guilt, shame and fear to be truly the freed people of God. "If you hold to my teaching," says our Lord, "you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Ignorance concerning the Word of God is more widespread than we like to admit. If one were to ask how someone is saved from hell, one would be shocked at how many life long Christian people would either say, "I don't know for sure", or that somehow you have to do something in order to be saved. Less that you think would say, "For 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." [Ephesians 2:8,9]. Only some would think to say something like, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have eternal life." [John 3:16]. Some of these people would not know the truth. That is what we mean by ignorance - not knowing. Still others do not know how to put their faith into words. This is a lesser problem, is it not; but it is also a problem that can be fixed through teaching. Christ wants all of us to be able to share our faith

with others. To share one's faith, one must know what to share, and how to share it. Ignorance of either the what or the how can restrict our ability to serve our Lord.

The Church of the twenty-first century needs to re-examine herself in light of today's text. We do not need more plans, programs, or projects. We need more prayer, piety, and preaching of the truth that sets people free from the slavery to sin. We need Christ to be the Key that unlocks the slavehouse. We need His good teachings that untie the ropes of ignorance. We need to be more pious in our regard to Christ's teachings. When the Word of God is taught among us, we pray that the Holy Spirit will give us receptive ears and enable us to receive the Word with open hearts and minds. We pray that God will continue to bless us with pastors and teachers who will not become bored or tired of teaching the Word of God, but will be steadfast in proclaiming the truth which sets us free. Then we will be slaves no more, but will be free to be the people of God, free to serve Jesus and one another. Then we will be liberated from the shackles of shame and pain, of guilt and fear. Slaves no more, because the Son Himself sets us free through His blood shed for you and me. May God grant us this freedom in Christ. Amen.

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