

Reformation Sunday
October 28, 2018
John 8:31-36
"Free Indeed"

"If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

The Lord has His audience until He says that. He's foiled the Pharisees' plot to stone the woman caught in adultery. He's even declared Himself to be the Light of the world, the Light from above who is witnessed by the Father. The people may not understand all this, but they believe in Him. Then He says it: "If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." That's when He loses them.

They respond, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?" It seems that they like Jesus and believe in Him, as long as He's a comfortable addition to what they already believe; but now He's told them that their doctrine has been wrong. They've been slaves, and they need to be free.

But how can they be slaves? They're descendants of Abraham. The Lord told Abraham that his descendants would be God's chosen people; therefore, these descendants of Abraham must be God's chosen people. After all, they've been trying to keep all the rules, just like their fathers and their grandfathers. How can Jesus say that they need to be set free?

So, to these people who believe that their daily good works and law-keeping have earned a place in the family of God, Jesus answers, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever, the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." His words bear some examination.

First, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." The people believe that they've kept the rules well enough. They believe that they've been serving God well enough to qualify as servants of God. With one sentence, though, Jesus dashes this idea. Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The Lord does not give partial credit to sinners: you are either sinless or you are sin-full. You are either holy or you are unholy. If you sin, you're not a servant of God—you're a slave to sin. And if sin is your master, it will drive you to death and destruction.

Next Jesus says, "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever." The people are trying to be servants of God, and strange as it may sound, this is wrong. Why? Because servants are on a contract: as long as they serve well, they are in the household. But if they stop serving, or if they're unable to serve anymore, then they're kicked out of the house. So while it is right to serve God, you don't want your relationship to be primarily a servant-lord relationship; if you're a servant, it's only a matter of time until you're kicked out of the house. No, far better than being a servant is being a son. A son is in the family not because of his works, but because he's family. If he obeys his parents, he's a son whom his father loves; if he

disobeys his parents, he's still a son whom his father loves. Servants get fired. Sons get forgiven and inherit the kingdom. Which would you rather be: a servant of God or a son of God?

Obviously, it's better to be a son than a servant, and here's the last thing that Jesus says: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." How do you become a servant? By works, by earning a place-by keeping the Law. How do you become a son? By being born. Thus, Jesus has already told Nicodemus in John 3:3, "Truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He adds two verses later, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:5). Put it together: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has won your redemption by His death and resurrection. By forgiveness, as given in the waters of Holy Baptism, He makes you His own dear child. He makes you an heir of eternal life. This is not your doing. It is His doing. He died. He rose. He forgives. He sets you free, and He does all this perfectly. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

This is what Jesus is telling the crowds around Him. They're trying to be servants of God, by keeping His Law, by earning a place in the household. This won't work: they can't keep God's Law; and even if they could, servants are only temporary residents. Instead, Jesus says, "Trust in Me, that I make you a son. I'll set you free from sin by My work. I'll make you an heir of the kingdom of God forever."

But the people don't buy it, and so they'll plot His death. Please note their words again: "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone." They are saying, "Abraham was saved by his obedience, and so we'll be saved by ours. It's how we've always done it." But they're wrong. Abraham wasn't saved by his works, his obedience, his keeping of the Law. Genesis 15:6 clearly says that Abraham believed in Yahweh, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. Abraham believed the promised that the Savior would come. Abraham believed that the Son would set him free. That's why Abraham was free indeed.

This may be a surprising thing to hear in a Reformation Day sermon, but mark well this error by the crowds, the error of "we've always done it that way." Tradition does not necessarily teach truth. If it continues to proclaim what the Scriptures say, great. Too often, however, what "we've always done" may depart from the Word of God, teaching a false doctrine instead. Remember the example of the crowds around Jesus: "We're saved the same way as we always have been-by works." But somewhere between Abraham and them, the message had slowly been twisted. Abraham wasn't saved by works. The crowd trusted in their pedigree and works, not in the Word of God, because they relied on tradition more than the Word. It's an example that plays out through the history of the Church.

Martin Luther grew up in a world where the Roman Catholic Church was in charge. Emperors ruled with permission of the Pope. The Vatican controlled the economy, establishing just prices for goods and wages for workers. It largely controlled society and punished heretics with torture and death by fire. And it taught a way of salvation.

Luther took salvation seriously and learned intently the doctrine which the priests taught. He learned that God was a just God. He learned that Jesus had died on the cross for the sins of the world. But he was also taught that he had to earn this salvation by good works, by keeping the Law, by avoiding sin or making up for sin by further works of penance. As long as he did well enough, punished himself enough, or paid enough money to the church, he would be forgiven for his sins. Using the language of the Gospel lesson, the church was teaching that, as long as you did well enough, you could be a servant of God.

This haunted Luther to no end. No matter how hard he tried to stop sinning, he still did; and he readily acknowledged that he was a slave to sin. Even as he struggled to do his best, he grew to hate God for giving Law that could never be kept. Finally, though, Luther discovered the Gospel. The church was wrong: he couldn't be saved by his works. But he could be saved by Jesus' work. Christ had died for the sins of Martin Luther, that He might forgive Martin Luther and make him a son of God, an heir of eternal life. It was this discovery that led Luther to post 95 theses on the door of a church for discussion around town on October 31, 1517. Luther's discovery of the Gospel was not received well by the church, and he was sentenced to death. Even though his life was at risk, he would not give up that sweet Gospel. He'd discovered what it meant to be free.

Now, Luther's opponents had something in common with the crowd that challenged Jesus. The crowd in John 8 said, "We are offspring of Abraham and we've always been saved this way." When the Reformation began, the response of the church in part was that Luther was a heretic, because people had always been saved by keeping the Law. But the church was wrong. Slowly, so gradually that few noticed over a millennium and a half, the church had changed drastically. It had virtually lost the Gospel, and taught salvation by works instead.

During the Reformation, then, Luther fought a two-front war. He had to fight those who justified false doctrine by saying, "We've always done it that way." On the other hand, he had to fight the so-called "radical reformers" who said, "We must get rid of everything that's been done and start over"; thus they rejected the Sacraments, the liturgy, and began destroying stain-glass windows and religious statues.

On the one hand, then, Luther was falsely condemned for innovating; and on the other hand, he was attacked for not innovating enough. What was the answer? What made tradition good or bad? What made innovation good or bad? When he preached on our Gospel lesson for today, Luther said this: "We must progress to the point where we say: 'God has promised'" (AE 23:400).

God has not promised salvation by works; instead, He says it is impossible. This is why Luther condemned the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, because it wasn't teaching the promises of God. God has most certainly promised that the Holy Spirit delivers the forgiveness of sins and He does so through His Word and Sacraments. Therefore, Luther condemned an innovation that rejected this promise.

Man's innovations and traditions do not save. God promises salvation in Christ, and He always keeps His Word.

As Christians we are called to faithfulness-faithfulness to the promises of God. It is our joy to declare to all who will hear the forgiveness, life and salvation that God promises through His Son, Jesus Christ; for if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

We cling to the promises of God because they are sure, and they deliver salvation, for God has given His Word. And so we examine whatever we do, and we make sure that it takes us to the promises of God. The liturgy we use in worship never fails to declare God's presence and promised grace in Christ, while other worship forms do not do so nearly as well, sometimes not at all. That is why we continue with these orders of service-not because "we've always done them," for that is a poor reason. We maintain these worship forms because they direct us to Christ and the forgiveness He has won on the cross.

We cling to the promises of God, but don't expect this to be easy. The devil, the world and our own sinful flesh hate God's promises and seek to wrest us away from them. Jesus delights to promise to us that He is the Savior-we have hope for eternal life. The world objects, "Only one Savior? How intolerant! We must do away with that promise." Jesus delights to remind us how certain are His promises of forgiveness in His Word and Sacraments. Your Old Adam says, "Nuts to that. What matters is how you feel. If you feel God is near, He is. If you feel He's far away, then He's far away." But the Lord makes no such promise to be present in your feelings; and that is good! Instead, He promises that He is as near to you as His Word and Sacraments, no matter how you feel.

This is what the Lord promises: He declares that His Son has suffered your death on the cross, so that you might have forgiveness and salvation. He declares that He has made you His own in Holy Baptism. He has made you His own child and heir-not a servant who must work for His favor, but a beloved son who already has eternal life. He promises that, by His Word, He continues to pour out His forgiveness and strengthen your faith. (Why, then, would we ever accept anything that contradicts that Word?) He promises that, though your own body and blood fail, He gives you His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, to strengthen and preserve you to everlasting life.

So we rejoice today not in the works of man, but in the promises of God. They do not change, and so your salvation is sure. Christ declares to you today: "You are my beloved child, because, by My death and resurrection, I have set you free. You are free indeed, because I promise that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen