

Freedom is a wonderful thing. I don't know that any of us would disagree with that statement, generally speaking. And yet, freedom is also a frequently misunderstood thing. What is freedom, and how is it to be used? These are questions that we struggle with today, just as people struggled with them back in Jesus' day. As we consider His words to the Jews in our Gospel reading, we'll hear something very important: the Truth sets you free so that you may remain in the Truth.

To get a better grasp on what takes place in our Gospel reading, we need to back up at least one verse. There we read, "As Jesus was saying these things, many believed in Him." Jesus has been in an ongoing discussion and debate with the Jews since earlier the chapter, and in that time He has said such things as, "Unless you believe that I am he (Literally 'I AM' – the name of God) you will die in your sins," and "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM."

Jesus is declaring that He is the Son of Man, the Messiah, and also I AM, Yahweh, the one true God, and that He is there to save His people from their sins, just as the prophets foretold. In response to such preaching, many come to believe in Him, receiving saving faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's wonderful!

This brings us to the beginning of our reading. "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed 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.'" We'll come back to abiding Jesus' word and being His disciples in just a moment, but notice what apparently sticks out to the Jews. Jesus tells them that if something happens, then they will be set free. In grammar, this is called a conditional sentence, meaning that the second part is only true if the first is true as well. The freedom of these believing Jews isn't absolute; it's conditional. Something must take place, must continue, for them to be set free.

This really gets under the Jews' skin, which we see in their 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'?" Obviously, the Jews here aren't talking about freedom in an historical sense. They're fully aware of the time of slavery in Egypt, and the exile in Babylon, and their current status as subjects of Rome.

No, they're talking about a spiritual freedom, a freedom of their souls, of their will. They're descended from Abraham, and so they see themselves as entitled to the promises God gave to Abraham. God has promised to be their God, and since God can't break His promises, they're good to go. These Jews believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but that was something they did. They checked that box, they jumped through that hoop, and now they think they're free to go on living their lives as they please, doing what they see as best. After all, they're free; they're the chosen people of God.

That Jesus tells them they have to continue abiding in His word, continue to follow Him in order to continue in the freedom He gives, the Jews don't want to hear this.

The Jews aren't alone in this attitude, though. The same thing happened at the time of the Reformation. Luther and the other reformers came and proclaimed God's word, that people couldn't earn their salvation through their own works, that salvation was a gift given freely through faith. The Gospel at last!

And yet, how do you think a lot of people responded? They quit going to church! If you don't earn your salvation, if it's just a free gift, then why bother with the word of God? Much of Luther's efforts were then spent trying to convince people that, though they had been set free from the false works of the papacy, their freedom was to be used in abiding in God's word, not indulging in their worldly desires.

This has been a struggle that continues to plague us today. We can gladly rejoice that we have been set free through faith in Jesus, that this is a free gift, that we are given new and eternal lives in the waters of Baptism. And we should rejoice – it is an incredible thing that our God has done for us! But once we have been set free from sin and death, what then?

Immediately, the temptation that afflicted the Jews and the people in the time of the Reformation comes to us as well. You're set free from sin and death, so now you can live as you please. If you've been baptized and confirmed, then you'll be in heaven for sure! Being a Christian becomes an outward label with which you identify. Faith becomes a one-time event. And God's word only speaks about how to "get saved" and nothing beyond that.

Now, these temptations usually don't pop up in full force overnight. They're usually subtle, little things that slowly strangle faith over time, little cracks in the foundation that slowly grow. The leisure activity that occasionally would take up a Sunday becomes the usual Sunday activity. Occasional Sunday morning overtime to get a little extra cash becomes applying for a different position that pays better but keeps you from gathering together with your fellow believers. Justifying our children's absence from receiving the gifts of God when they're young turns into watching them lose the faith entirely in college.

When we're confronted by God's word, by His Commandments, we're tempted to take the path of the Jews in our Gospel reading, to take the promises of God out of context and make them say things He never did.

Yet consider these words spoken through Ezekiel, words that just recently came up in our yearly reading plan. The Lord says, "Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die." God promises to save those who remain in the righteousness which He gives to them, but if they turn from that, if they start trusting in their own "righteousness" and use it as an excuse for their sins, they will perish.

Or consider again those Jews from our Gospel reading. Many of them believe in Jesus. But when they're confronted with the need to remain in Jesus and His word, and not simply do as they please, they fall away. They go from questioning Jesus' teaching to accusing Him of being an illegitimate son to saying He's demon-possessed and finally trying to stone Him to death.

This is precisely why Jesus speaks the words that He does. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” He knows that even we who believe are in this life still attacked by temptation, still wearing our old sinful flesh around our necks, as Luther described it. Our Creator knows that we cannot resist temptation on our own, and so He freely gives us the means to resist it. He gives us prayer, teaching us to pray “lead us not into temptation.”

And He gives us His word, the Holy Bible. The Bible isn’t just a book of good morals and values or something. It is the very words of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit through the pens of the prophets, apostles, and evangelists. When you hear the Scriptures, you hear God talking to you. And God’s word is never empty. It contains His power to transform, to heal, to strengthen. As we abide in it, the Spirit uses it to make us think like God thinks, to love like God loves, to desire what God desires.

Working through the word, God shows you how He has cared for His people of every time and place, and promises you that He will do the same for you. Through the word, He declares to you that He has set you free from slavery to sin and death, and so you are free indeed. Through the word, God reminds you that you are not just a slave, but a son or daughter of the God of the universe, that you get to call the Lord of heaven and earth “Father.”

When we gather together as His people around His word, He comes to us and blesses us. He uses that fellowship we share on Sunday mornings to remind each of us that we are not alone. When your neighbors and coworkers and even family members drift further and further into moral darkness, gathering together with God’s people around the word reminds you that you are not alone, that you’re not crazy, that you are in the truth.

Sharing that saving, freeing truth with others is what inspired Luther and other Reformers to put the Bible into the language of the people, even though it was punishable by death. We are blessed to have God’s word in our English language through the courage and faithfulness of men like William Tyndale, who was strangled and then burned as a heretic for his translation work.

Still today, our brothers and sisters in Christ risk violence, imprisonment, and even death as they gather around God’s word in places like Nigeria, India, and China. They do so knowing that their Lord has set them free, and nothing of this world can take that away from them. They use their freedom to abide in the word, being strengthened and comforted until the day comes when the Lord completely frees from sin and death.

As we celebrate the festival of the Reformation, let us look to their example, those who have suffered and even died for the sake of the word, those who gave up their earthly freedom for the sake of eternal freedom. Let us use our freedom to follow in their footsteps. Jesus Christ, the Truth of God, has set us free through His death and resurrection, and has made us God’s sons and daughters through faith. Let us use our freedom to abide in the truth of the word, that we may remain free forever.

In Jesus’ name, amen.