

October 27, 2024

Reformation Day (observed)

Texts: John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28

In the winter of 1518-1519, a little over a year after nailing up the Ninety Five Theses, Martin Luther took up a new practice. He had been learning Greek and started putting it to use by signing many of his letters and writings as “Eleutherius.” Why the taking up of this pen name? Well, it actually comes from the Greek word “eleutheros,” which means someone who have been set free. So not only did Eleutherius have “Luther” right in the middle of it, but more importantly, it hit on a key Biblical teaching that Luther was trying to bring to light once more in the Church.

This is the teaching heard in many places in Holy Scripture, including our reading from St. John’s Gospel, the teaching that, in Jesus, we are set free. Luther had come to this glorious truth of freedom in Christ, and as Eleutherius, one set free, he desired that everyone else know it too.

As we consider this freedom written of in the Bible, we need to ask three questions to better understand it. First, from what are we set free? Second, how are we set free? And third, for what purpose have we been set free? As we study what God tells us in His Word in answer to these questions, we’ll find all the more comfort and joy in Jesus’ words: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

So first off, from what have you been set free? The answer is pretty straightforward. One who believes in Jesus has been set free from sin and death. Pretty simple, right? There are a couple things that must be noted here, though.

Being a Christian doesn’t mean that you’re set free from worldly troubles. Jesus Himself says, “In the world, you will have tribulation.” These tribulations can be physical, mental, financial, interpersonal, even spiritual. Being set free by Jesus isn’t a path to worldly comfort. Just ask Luther, who suffered in all sorts of different ways and then died at the ripe old age of 62.

Another thing the Reformer would point out is that you aren’t set free from worldly authority. Some took this “freedom of the Gospel” and said it meant they didn’t have to obey any worldly authorities at all, that Christ was the only King. The revolts this set off caused great pain and suffering, and Luther wrote in support of the princes in putting down the revolt, for as Scripture says, we are to be subject to the governing authorities, unless their laws and orders go against the Word of God.

The other issue that comes in to rightly understanding what it means to be set free from sin and death is understanding the seriousness of it, and not taking the gift for granted. The Jews in Jesus’ day struggled with this, claiming that, since they were children of Abraham, they weren’t spiritually enslaved to anyone or anything.

Thus, Jesus speaks the hammer of the Law to them – and to all. “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” People often have the attitude toward sin like that of someone trapped in addiction. “It’s not a big deal. I’m still in control. I can quit anytime I want.” Jesus is effectively calling that out with respect to sin. If you think you’re in total control of your life, then fine, just stop sinning. If you aren’t a slave to sin, that you’re the master of your thoughts, words, and deeds, then prove it.

If we're honest with ourselves, this silences our prideful boasts of freedom then and there. Either we are willfully choosing to practice sin, which isn't what a disciple of Jesus does, or we have to admit that we aren't fully in control of our lives like we think we are. As Paul writes in Romans, this is the Law silencing every mouth, that the whole world may be held accountable to God.

Our response as sinners, though, is often to not be honest with ourselves, and with God. We might say that what we do isn't that bad, that they aren't grievous sins against God Most High, but little slip-ups, honest mistakes. Surely such trivial offenses – as we might describe them – aren't deserving of divine punishment. And in addition, we convince ourselves that God grades on the curve. “Yes, I might sin on occasion, but I'm still better than most people out there, and surely God wouldn't condemn everyone, right?”

Such attempts at rationalizing and explaining away our sins are useless. We can say we aren't enslaved to sin all we want, but as Jesus points out, the fact that we continue to sin shows us otherwise.

And if we try to claim that our sins aren't that big of a deal, God answers that in His Word as well. “The wages of sin is death,” and “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This would be to say that, if your sins aren't that big of a deal, then prove it: don't die. Guess what? You won't be able to.

Just like how no one can keep from sinning by his own efforts, so too can no one keep from dying by his own efforts. It's a reality that we can't escape. Before Christ sets us free, we truly are enslaved to sin and death.

But that's exactly why Christ has come! He Himself proclaims this, teaching in His hometown synagogue that He is the fulfillment of Isaiah 61: “He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

The Son of God came to earth, not to teach us how to free ourselves, but to Himself set us free from sin and death. Because of Jesus, we are not bound to sin. Because of Jesus, we have certainty of hope, of life beyond the grave. That certainty is found in the words of Jesus Himself. He says, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Not maybe. Not probably. “Free indeed.”

This certainty is tied to the answer to our second question: how are we set free? The first thing to note here is that we don't set ourselves free. Nor is it a joint effort between us and God. It is God alone.

This is what brought Luther such comfort. He'd been trying to find assurance in living a holy life. He'd given up a promising, lucrative career in law to become a monk. He fasted so much he inflicted permanent harm on his body. He spent hours in the confessional, to the annoyance of his confessor. And still, it wasn't enough, because Luther realized that God's Law demands perfection.

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Leviticus 19. “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” James 2. Despite his best efforts –

sincere efforts – Luther kept falling short of the glory of God – as do all who think they can earn heaven, even in part.

But then, God the Holy Spirit granted wonderful comfort to Luther through His Word. Especially prominent in this was the book of Romans, including today’s Epistle reading. There, God tells us that though we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, all “are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith.”

There is the wonderful, freeing comfort of the Gospel! Consider all that the Holy Spirit tells us there. We are justified – declared innocent of sin – by God’s grace. We haven’t earned it. We can’t earn it. And we certainly don’t deserve it! But God justified us anyway, because He is the God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Our salvation is a gift, a free gift, given by a loving God.

How did God bring about this justification, this freedom? Through the blood of Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation – an atoning sacrifice. See, God couldn’t just wave His hands and make sin disappear. He couldn’t shout from heaven that He’d decided that He was just ignoring sin and so everyone was good.

It’s not a matter of power, for God is all-powerful. It’s a matter of justice. God is perfectly just, and so He cannot ignore sin. Transgressions of His Law must have their just consequences, and these must be given out equally, for God shows no favoritism. The chains of sin and death we had were the just consequences for our sins.

But in love, God desires to set us free. How did He take away our sins while still ensuring that the just consequences took place? By taking them on Himself. God became man so that He might become mortal and suffer death, the wages of our sins. He put our shackles on His own wrists, by nails, nonetheless.

In doing this He remained holy – the spotless Lamb of God – and since He had no sin of His own, He took our sins upon Himself and paid for them by His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. St. Paul puts it wonderfully in 2 Corinthians 5, where he declares, “For our sake He (the Father) made Him (the Son) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Because of our sins, we all deserve God’s just wrath. But Jesus Christ has taken all your sins, all my sins, all the sins of the entire human race, onto Himself and nailed them to His cross. Each and every transgression, from the “littlest” sin that we might try to dismiss, to the “greatest” sin that we hope no one ever finds out about, they are all taken away by the blood of the Lamb. The Son has set you free indeed.

How is such a great gift received? As Paul points out, it is received “by faith.” Faith in Jesus is what clings to Him, trusts in Him for salvation, receives the benefits that Christ won on the cross. Through His atoning sacrifice, Jesus paid for the sins of the world; faith is the channel through which

that payment is credited to your account. Christ's sacrifice is the key put into the shackles of sin and death; faith is what turns the key.

And as with Christ's sacrifice, faith is also a gift given to us by God. Faith isn't some part of our will or conscience that already there and we just have to put it to correct use. No, faith comes to us from God.

How does it come? By the Word of God! God grants faith through the Word, and only through the Word. Consider the words of St. John toward the end of his Gospel account. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Or recall the well-known verse from Romans 10: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ."

It is the Word that God the Holy Spirit uses to bring faith, to grant new and everlasting life. He uses words of Law to shatter sinful hearts and bring men to repentance, and then He uses words of Gospel to grant new hearts and give peace and comfort. His Word both describes the gifts Christ gives and then also miraculously brings those gifts to our very souls.

The Lord also works miraculously through His Word by joining it to physical elements in what we call the Sacraments. He joins His Word to water in Holy Baptism, making it, as Luther describes it in the Catechism, "a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit." Our Lord ties His Word, even His Triune Name, to those waters, that we might know that, at the font, we are made sons and daughters of God and thereby have a place in His house forever.

The Lord also ties His Word to bread and wine in His Supper. There, He – the Word made flesh – makes the bread His flesh and the wine His blood. The same body offered up on the cross is given to His people at the rail. The same blood that washed away the sin of the world is drunk by His people, that His life might grant them life.

Our Lord sets us free, giving us faith through the hearing of His Word, washing away our sins through water joined to His Word, and then feeding us with the Word made flesh. We are justified by faith, apart from works of the Law. Our freedom comes about from our Lord, not ourselves.

Having been set free, we now come to our third question: for what purpose have we been set free? The Son hasn't set us free so that we can do whatever we want. Freedom doesn't mean that we're our own gods, deciding good and evil for ourselves. That was the lure Satan used in the Garden to get us into the chains of sin and death in the first place.

No, Jesus set us free to be His disciples. Disciple means 'student,' or 'follower.' He sets us free, not so that we can go our own way, but so that we might walk in His ways. God grants us His Word, not so that we might glance it over, pass a test, and then cast it aside, but so that we might abide in it, remain in it, live in it.

Our Lord tells us this because only His way is the way to heaven. All other paths lead to destruction. He commands us to abide in His Word because only His Word sustains saving faith. To abide in anything else is to put the shackles back on. Abiding in God, in His Word, in His Sacraments, is what keeps us in eternal freedom.

And to walk in His ways is ultimately best, not only for us, but for others. As the Word tells us, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” We are set free, not to serve ourselves, but to serve God and our neighbor.

As we abide in God’s Word, living out our lives as Christians, God will use us to show forth that freedom to others, that they might be set free by Him as well. You and I may not lead a Reformation, but like our namesake, Dr. Luther, we each can take the title Eleutherius, for the Son has set us free indeed.

In the name of Jesus, amen.