

Abide In My Word

Reformation

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John 8:31-36

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Today we celebrate our Independence Day!” These words have significant meaning in our ears in several ways. You might be thinking: Wait, wait, wait, today’s Reformation Sunday, or the day before Halloween, not July fourth. Others of you might be contemplating on how I like movies and think I’m referring to the quote made by Bill Pullman from the first *Independence Day* movie. Still others of you might be mentally going to the freedoms we have in this country, the United States of America, which stands to be free.

You see, your minds all have places they go when they hear the words “Today we celebrate our Independence Day!” On the flipside, then, where do your thoughts go if I were to say the words “slave” or “slavery”? Do they go to the Civil War? Do they go to the Old Testament where the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt? Or maybe to where the same Israelites were slaves in Babylon during the Babylonian Captivity? Once more, your thoughts might have particular locations they go to first when you hear the words “slave” or “slavery.”

Today, Jesus tells you that you are a slave. You are not free. You are in bondage, to use some good old *Luther-an* terminology. What do you think of those words? Are you disturbed by that concept? Or do you immediately dismiss it, thinking Jesus is referring to a physical slavery?

Today, we will consider our Gospel text where Jesus tells some Jews, and indeed every human being including you, that you are a slave. We will contemplate if we have been freed; how we have been freed; and by who. What better task could we do this Reformation as we consider Martin Luther, who had considered himself a slave to sin for so long in his own life?

Verse 1

“Jesus said to the Jews who had believed 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.’ They answered him, ‘We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, “You will become free”?’”

When Jesus said that the truth would set the Jews free, they responded that they had never been enslaved to anyone. This is an interesting assertion as their ancestors had been enslaved to both Egypt and Babylon. That aside, they were also subject to Rome at the time that Jesus was speaking to them. Yet these Jewish leaders appealed to the freedom they had in their heritage from Abraham.

Today, you could also say that you are not slaves. You are no longer in a country under the rule of Europe. Yet at the same time, the words Jesus spoke to the Jews at the time of our Gospel text also apply to us today, just as it did to those Jews at the time that Jesus spoke them.

You are not free; you are in bondage. That’s what Jesus says. Do you have a hard time swallowing that fact, or do you recognize it in your own members?

Far too often, it may be easy for us LCMS Lutherans to dismiss the state that we were in before Christ called us. As Lutherans we know all too clearly—which is a good thing in some respects—that we are set free in Christ. But because we know that so clearly, we may miss how far in sin we had been. Think of Luther—the Luther before he found those freeing words in Romans. He was being taught that his petty works could atone

for his sins and that buying pieces of paper could make atonement for sins. Yet at the same time, he was being taught that there were so many sins he committed that he would have to go to this place called purgatory to work off the rest of them, and rely on his descendants to buy those pieces of paper for him while he was there. I learned Friday night listening to a former Catholic who majored in history that the Catholic religion teaches that these people could be in purgatory for millions of years working off their sins. Can you imagine that? Or are you too comfortable with your Lutheran-tinted glasses? Or do you think that your sins are really so slight and that you weren't or aren't really slaves to them?

Verse 2

"Jesus answered (the Jews), '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. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you.'"

Here Jesus acknowledges that He knows that these Jewish leaders are offspring of Abraham—and yet He still says that they are slaves, slaves of sin. But He also acknowledges that some of those to whom He was speaking would not be able to let His Word find place in them. They would refuse to hear or believe that they were slaves of sin. They would refuse to abide in Jesus' Word.

So also would we refuse to abide in Jesus' Word if it were not for His sacrificial death on the cross. Because of the fall into sin, our wills have been put into bondage to only desire evil and sin, and to refuse anything good or of God. That's the entire reason that Jesus came. Jesus knew already that "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin...(but that) if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

In other words, by His death on the cross of Calvary, Jesus set us free from our bondage to sin and the bondage of our will—to a certain extent. This is how it is put in the Formula of Concord: "As Christ says, [baptized people] have been made free again [John 8:36]. Therefore, they are able not only to hear the Word, but also to agree with it and accept it, although in great weakness".

The Son has set us free by His death and resurrection, but as the Formula says, it is still only those who have been baptized and who have received the Holy Spirit who can agree with Him. And it is not they who agree with Him of themselves, but by the power of the Holy Spirit whom they receive at baptism, and that in great weakness.

Today many pastors no longer wear the quote-unquote "traditional" uniform of a black clerical shirt with black slacks. Some pastors never wear it the shirt, even when conducting the Divine Service, and others wear it, but sometimes with other colors of pants, like myself. Still other pastors wear different colors of clerical shirts than the again quote-unquote "traditional" black ones. And they have the freedom to do so. Nowhere in Scripture does it say that pastors must wear black clerical shirts. Yet those who do wear the traditional outfit demonstrate what Jesus said and the Formula affirmed very well: even in Christ we are mostly still in sin, doing those things we don't want to do, yet we still have this little bit of white which is the saint portion we have received in Him.

Verse 3

Jesus knew that His death was coming—that same death which would free us. He spoke of "what (He had) seen from the Father, and (He tells them to) do what you have heard from your father," that is, the devil.

Jesus knew His death would come at the hands of those who did not believe in Him—who could not believe in Him of their own wills. They were in bondage to sin.

Now, however, we have been set free by His death and resurrection; and Jesus tells us, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Again, with all this black, you might be wondering how one could ever abide in Jesus’ Word until He returns or until you go to be with Him. But it is not up to you to abide in His Word—that is why the Formula put “baptized people.” We believe and trust that the Holy Spirit, the third person of God Himself, is keeping us in the one true faith unto life everlasting. And because it is the desire of God and therefore all three persons of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we can trust that we will be kept in faith until that Day.

Then, on that Day, the “traditional” uniform can and will be entirely cast out. It will make way for the rest of a pastor’s garb: the white robe. That’s what we’ll hear next weekend. This weekend we celebrate the Reformation and God’s restoring to us His Word in its full truth and purity through His servant Luther; next weekend we’ll hear about the Church Triumphant, who wear the “white robes” of Christ’s righteousness, entering heaven in John’s Revelation, as they leave this world of “great tribulation” and enter heavenly glory. Yet even that is not the end of the story in Christ, but we’ll continue that thought next weekend. For now, we can be content because we ‘know the truth, and (we know that) the truth (both has and) will set (us) free.’ In Jesus’ Name. Amen.