

John 8:31-36

Reformation (Observed) + October 28, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Free Indeed

The Word of the Lord from John 8:34-36. Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices 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." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the parable of the "prodigal son," and it begins like this:

"There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:11-16)

"But when he finally came to his senses, he said ... "

Well, you probably know what he said: it's a famous parable. You also know what he didn't say. Standing in the muck, envying the pigs for their food supply, he didn't say, "Now I am finally free."

Oh, he'd escaped the, uh, "tyranny" of the childhood home, along with the father who expected his sons to put in an honest day's work on the family farm. He'd declared himself liberated from that "silly" rule that said that, before he inherited half of his father's property, his father had to die first. This son had said, "I want to be free from my responsibilities and free to do whatever I want to do, and when I want to do it." His goal was personal autonomy and he achieved it ... only to find out that his "eat, drink, and be merry with prostitutes" lifestyle led him to a life where he envied the pigs for their luxurious living. The only means of survival he could find was a job feeding pigs: the "free" individual had become a servant to swine!

That's a pretty vivid illustration of Jesus' words in our gospel lesson, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." False gods demand obedience and sacrifice: they demand slaves, not just followers. The tricky thing about the idols of today is that they're usually dressed up in the guise of personal autonomy, and so the world argues that you have the right to be what you want to be, as well as the right to do what you want to do. Your most important right is your right to choose anything, everything. It's all about you, which is the dominant creed of your sinful nature; and if it's all about you, then it's not about Jesus.

Thus you're constantly encouraged to defy God's Word and do whatever you want to do, be whatever you want to be. But if you're defying God's Word, it's sin; and anyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

The world's notion of personal autonomy is actually slavery. Just think it through a bit, because this is how it goes: when you adopt the idea that you have the right to do what you want, you've joined the millions of people who are thinking the same way – so far from being an individual, you're just part of a big herd repeating the same mantra. The herd will subdivide into smaller herds; and wherever you go, you've got your freedom to choose whatever. Some of those free choices are obviously damaging: if you

skip classes for the gaming subculture at college, you'll end up with a bunch of student debt and no degree, which sets you free to work any minimum-wage job you can find for because you have no education. Get into a subculture of addiction, be it substance abuse or pornography, and you rewire body and brain so that you become a slave to your cravings.

Even where the choice isn't inherently foolish, it's still a collection of like-minded individuals who each want personal autonomy, which has them saying inside, "Even though we're together, I want my way." That means that, over time, these groups tend to whittle down as each looks out for himself. Ultimately, anybody who says, "I have a right to whatever I want" is going to be lonely and alone. Hopefully, they learn that lesson early in life; if not before, they learn it in death.

Because death comes: and everybody who says, "I have the right to be and do whatever I want," finds out that they can't choose to be alive when their number's up. Death wins: it's the master, which makes them the slave. Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

Of course, Jesus' hearers aren't campaigning for personal autonomy: they're not the sort who cheer on the prodigal son. They're more like that older brother in the parable – the good kid, the responsible one. They're likely to cluck their tongues and say, "Of course this quest for personal autonomy results in slavery, because you become a slave to your desires. That's why we've kept our noses clean. As descendants of Abraham, we've made it a point to keep God's law and serve Him."

That sounds better ... but Jesus still calls them slaves. Why? Because they think they're God's people *because* they serve Him, and here's the danger: "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever." How long is a servant welcome in his master's house? For as long as he is able to get the work done. If he refuses to do his duties or starts to do damage, he's fired. But also, if he becomes sick or feeble or otherwise unable to perform his duties, he's going to be eased out of the house to make room for servants who can get the job done.

If you want to be in the house forever, you don't want to be a servant. You want to be the master's son. If you want to be in the kingdom of heaven forever, you don't want to be a servant of God: you want to be a child of God.

And how do you become a child of God? You can't do it. There's only one Son who deserves to be in the house, and it's not you. But for His sake, you're in. Kids become part of a family by getting born or getting adopted. The Bible uses both ideas to describe Holy Baptism: you're born again by water and the Spirit, and so you receive the adoption as sons. You're not part of the kingdom of heaven because you've earned your way in. You don't hold your spot in the kingdom by your dedicated performance. That would make you a slave, not a child. But solely by the grace and the work of God, you *are* His child.

You're baptized! You're not *still working* on being born again, but you *are* born again. You're a child of God, and you're a child of God because God's only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, became flesh and died for you. You haven't earned the kingdom: He paid for it with *His* blood (not yours!). The Son remains in the house forever; and because you're baptized into Him, you remain in the house forever too.

That's the truth at the core of the Reformation which we celebrate today. You're saved by grace, not by works. You have eternal life because Christ has joined you to His death and His resurrection. You don't live your life wondering if you've done enough to earn your keep. You're not haunted by the sins that outweigh your good works, wondering if your resumé is good enough to get you across the line. You haven't been hired or contracted into the kingdom of God. You've been born into it.

So what do you do? You live as the freest people ever to walk the earth.

You live set free from sin, because it's no longer your master. Where it daily seeks to enslave you, the solution is easy: you repent. You say, "I'm baptized! I'm not a slave to sin anymore. I'm not a slave to my passions and desires, because I've been cleansed of all that by Jesus."

You're set free from the haunting thought that you're part of God's kingdom because you're earning it. Where you're daily tempted to think otherwise, you repent again and say, "I'm baptized! Not only am I not sin's slave, I'm not God's slave either! I'm His holy and beloved child."

Thus you're set free to do what you were created to do, and free to be what you were created to be.

And what has God created you to do? He has created you to love and to serve. I mean, if you're set free from sin and enslavement to serving yourself, what else are you going to do? What has God created you to be? His holy child, and His hands, feet and voice to those around you – again, not to earn your keep, but because He bestows this honor upon you.

This is the joy of the Reformation. This is why the Lutheran Church exists and remains: saved by grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, through faith alone.

So beware of the world's constant theme that personal autonomy is true freedom, because that traces its way back to a couple in a garden saying, "We're free to defy God and eat this forbidden fruit. What can go wrong?" Beware the tempting thought that heaven is yours because you're a good person doing good things, because then you're saying that you don't really need Jesus.

No, rejoice in this good news: by His death and resurrection, the Son has set you free. And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

And so you are free indeed, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen