

Reformation - 10/30/2019

Text: John 8:31-36; Romans 3:18-29

“The Festival of the Reformation is at once a day of Christmas and of Easter and of Pentecost, in our Church year; a day of birth, a day of resurrection, a day of the outpouring of the Holy Ghost.” So writes Charles Porterfield Krauth, an American Lutheran who lived around the same time as C.F.W. Walther, who fought for the Lutheran church in America to remain faithful to the Lutheran Confessions and not to go astray in this new land.

Krauth's aim is to stress the importance of the *message* of the Reformation, and that we keep the Gospel message alive by continuing to celebrate Reformation Sunday in remembrance of the work of the reformers. I agree with Krauth, but I think I'd use a slightly different analogy for us. Reformation Day is probably better equated, for us Americans at least, to our own civil celebration of Independence Day — the 4th of July. That day is a celebration of our release and freedom from political tyranny. And especially on Reformation Day we rejoice and celebrate that *we are free*. Humanity has been set free by God's wonderful work for us in Jesus Christ, our savior from Sin.

Back in the Garden of Eden, mankind *was* free. Adam and Eve were made by God in His image, they were given dominion over the fish of the sea and the bird of the air and over every thing that moves upon the land and creeps upon the earth. Every tree in the Garden was given to them for food, with one exception.

What happened to that freedom? Satan tempted, and the woman took from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – the one exception – and ate. And she gave it to the man and he ate. And their eyes were opened, and they knew good and evil. They tried to make things right. They covered themselves up. They hid. They tried to self-justify.

God freed them, right then and there. He promised the Messiah, right then and there. Adam and Eve passed on that promise. Then Noah came along, and all the world was wicked and opposed to the Lord, and He was grieved. He preserved believing Noah and his family, eight souls in all, through the flood. They came out of the ark on dry ground and God preserved their freedom, right then and there, promising never again to destroy all life by a flood. He gave the rainbow as a sign of His favor and the freedom that we have in Him and His promises.

He freed Israel from their bondage and slavery. He brought them through the Red Sea on dry ground and drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his host in the waters. Right then and there, God freed His people, promising them that He was their God and they were His people.

This is God's ongoing action for all of mankind: He sets us free. Not because of our own doing, but as a gracious and loving gift.

This is what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel reading: **"If the son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** Jesus, the Son of God, is sent by the Father to free us from sin and from sin's bondage. The long-ago-promised, long-hoped-for seed of the woman came and was bruised for our transgressions and pierced for our iniquities. By His stripes we are healed, by His blood we are washed clean, by His death we are set free from our slavery to sin, by His paying our sin-debt we are ransomed from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God. Christ Jesus does this for the whole world, for all mankind. Jesus sets the world free in His death and resurrection.

It's far easier to acknowledge that the whole world needs Jesus, than to confess that *you yourself* need Jesus. We must not be like those Jews who were believing in Jesus, who are then scandalized by His promise to set them free and say to Him, **"We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone."** After all, Jesus says, **"everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."**

Think about it: when you are caught in a transgression, what's your first instinct, what are you first moved to do? To play it down? To justify yourself? To dismiss it? Do you take more pleasure in acknowledging others' sins and others' need for Jesus, instead of confessing *your* sin and *your* need for Jesus? I imagine it comes and goes; probably depends on the day. But the fact that it comes and goes is enough to convict you and me. In our sin we are slaves; we need to be liberated, set free.

So do you see that you need Jesus? Do you see that you need the true freedom that Jesus gives you? You will not free yourself by justifying what you think, say, and do. You will not be free by breaking your own chains. Only in the blood and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will you be free indeed.

The Reformation was and still is about making this saving truth crystal clear: Christ's death is all-sufficient to make you not guilty in God's sight; the guilt of your sin was laid on Jesus and His righteousness is given to you, a blessed exchange.

This is the freedom that Luther longed for: he was burdened by his sins, tormented in his conscience by them. He could not find certainty of salvation in himself or in what he did. But He found freedom – “rediscovered” freedom – in the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for the sins of the world, whose righteousness is given to us as a free gift by a loving and merciful God.

Do you long for freedom? Freedom from the command to be better, to do more? Freedom from your conscience which is burdened with every thing that you’ve done or have left undone? Freedom from the harassment of the devil, who wants nothing more than again to enslave you and drag you into hell and eternal separation from God?

The true and only freedom is found in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, **“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”** Paul writes, **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...”**

Jesus has set you free on His cross. God put Jesus on the cross to shed his blood, as a propitiation—an atoning sacrifice—for your sins. Christ’s life given there on Calvary pays the ransom to free you forever from your wretched master, Sin.

Jesus has set you free in the font. Jesus baptized you, bringing you with Him into His grave and into His resurrection. **“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”** Sons remain in the house forever. And that’s what you are now: sons, heirs according to promise. You will dwell in the house of the Lord forever as free and righteous children.

Jesus sets you free here, now, today. Even as you find yourself enslaved again, hear the words which are the very heart and soul of the Christian Church and the thing which matters most about the Reformation; the words that are the chief thing which we celebrate today and forever.

“Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God.” And He has called me here to this place as His man to announce to you that, In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus has set you free.

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