

10.29.2023 Reformation Sunday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

“Freedom in Christ”

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

On Reformation Sunday, we give thanks to God that we are justified by grace through faith, set free by Christ to live for others. Jesus’ words, “*and the truth will make you free,*” stand in contrast to every human word ever written or spoken about freedom. Jesus’ words make me ask, “In ‘The Land of the Free’ how do you use your freedom in Christ for others?”

Daily, as we each face struggles, imagine not knowing the grace of Jesus Christ, his cross and resurrection. Imagine a life not knowing Christian freedom that truly frees us from every human limitation, boundary, and institution so that we might cross boundaries for Christ and our neighbor.

Without knowing Christ, humanity is in constant conflict, disunity, and hatred. Without knowing Christ, we are overcome by fear, oppressing those we are afraid of, and defeating those whom we are told are our enemies. Without knowing Christ, we never see our lives and the times in which we live as framed by God’s eternity and unfolding love for this world.

Even a cursory glance at the current state of our world bears this out. Nations continue to rise up against one another; people are hated and killed for the sake of their nationality, ethnicity or religion. Our neighbor is oppressed because of the color of their skin, their gender, or their identity. Again and again, we suffer the grief of mass shootings in this nation, and yet we do little to change our sinful ways. Daily we see our neighbors in need in poverty and affliction on the streets of this nation, and daily we see images of our neighbor around the world suffering from oppression and natural disasters. Yet we are so consumed by our own reflection in the mirror of partisan conflicts that over and over we fail to do the good we know we should do. This is the sinfulness that Jesus and Paul speak of today.

Amid the troubles of our world, Psalm 46 proclaims the nearness of God: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.*” I remember it was this psalm that was read in the seminary chapel in Tokyo on March 12, 2011 the day after the earthquake and tsunami. Psalm 46 reminds us that though the mountains shake and the seas foam, “*God is in the midst of the city.*” On Reformation Sunday we hear again good news spoken to a world in need. Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant prepares us to hear the gospel about true freedom, not in

human institutions, but in the living reality of Jesus Christ raised and alive.

Jesus is the gift of grace who opens our eyes to see the sin of our self-centeredness, our hard-heartedness, and our pridefulness. Jesus is the truth who frees us to live for others.

Yet some folks might wonder, “What is this freedom that Jesus is talking about? I have freedoms under the laws of this land to live as I want. I’m already free.” Jesus is not talking about freedoms guaranteed by human institutions; rather, Jesus is talking about freedom that overcomes the sinful brokenness of our human institutions. Jesus is talking about freedom to reimagine human community where enemies might break bread together rather than tearing down one another. Jesus is talking about freedom that acts with courage to lift up those who have been beaten down. Jesus is talking about freedom that drives out human fear, allowing us to pray with confidence, *“thy will be done here on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Freedom in Christ is not a philosophy. Freedom in Christ is not a legal document or a form of government. Freedom in Christ is not guaranteed by any human power. The freedom that Jesus proclaims is the truth about himself: *“So if the Son sets you free you will be free indeed.”* Jesus’ self-revelation is *“the way, and the truth and the life”* that has been setting people free for over two thousand years. The radical truth of Jesus is that he lives to free both you and your enemy so that together we might rebuild human community alive to God’s compassion and forgiveness.

It’s probably helpful to remember that early Christians possessed no legal freedoms under Roman law, nevertheless, they were *“free indeed.”* They were persecuted for their faith, yet their faith lifted them above their persecutors by knowing a Lord above Caesar. Knowing Jesus Christ alive in faith made them fearless. Set free by grace from sin, Christ set them free from the limits of oppression, nationalism, imperialism. Early Christians transformed the world with a transcendent freedom rooted here on earth in the incarnate love of service to others.

In today’s gospel, Jesus’ words to the Jews who believed in him are revolutionary: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* Jesus’ words transcend national, ethnic, and religious identity by opening humanity to know the truth about ourselves. We are slaves to sin, a humanity that commits the same brutal acts over and over. Paul words, *“for there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* identify the problem. The problem lies not with the one whom we are told is our enemy; the problem lies within each of us. Wouldn’t you like to be free from your past, present and future sinfulness? Wouldn’t you like to be free of the brokenness of our world

and its systems? Knowing Jesus Christ frees us to reimagine a world of God's love and peace for all.

Jesus doesn't give us a new written law; he gives us himself. Jesus is the truth in the bread and wine, who says, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.*" Jesus is the atonement – "the at-one-ment" – who make us one with him, with one another, and with our neighbor.

On Reformation Sunday, we remember freedom in Christ begins with the reformation of our hearts, liberating us from hatred, division, and war by giving us a mission to help our neighbor. Over 500 years ago, Martin Luther wrote, "What benefit to your neighbor are the glitter and ceremonies of the church, the clergy's robes, and the sanctuary? ...God has commanded none of these, but only that if you see your neighbor...in sin or in suffering in body and soul, you are to leave everything else and at once help your neighbor in every way within your power, and if you can do no more, help your neighbor with words of comfort and prayer. Thus, Christ has done for you, giving you an example to follow.

For Luther, Christian freedom isn't simply an abstract idea, it is freedom to live for others. In 1523, Luther published the *Ordinance of the Common Chest*, encouraging local congregations to establish a "common chest" of money and food, out of which they would help the stranger, the poor, the sick, and the needy. The heritage of the Reformation is the joyful gospel of justification by grace through faith, freeing us to serve our neighbor.

Christ frees you by grace to serve others. This is what we do at St. Mark's, acting freely and boldly for our neighbor through the Soup Kitchen, Room in the Inn, Stephen Ministry, Kairos Prison Ministry, and all of our ministries. We are freed to live as servants of Christ!

Today we bring forward our 2024 Pledges of financial gifts as a sign of using our freedom in Christ in the ministries of this congregation. Freed by Christ, we labor in love. Freed by grace, we offer our entire lives freely in service to Christ and our neighbor.

In "The Land of the Free," how do you use your freedom in Christ?

Christ has set you free to live boldly with courage. Act with freedom in Christ because Christ is acting through you. Amen.