

10.27.2024 Reformation Sunday

Pastor Tim McKenzie

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

“The Son makes you free”

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. Grace is the gift and work of God (Eph. 2:8) in us. We are justified by grace, and our faith is a response to God’s grace. Responding to God’s grace, our faith becomes active in love toward our neighbor (Gal. 5:6).

On Reformation Sunday we don’t simply commemorate a historical event; we celebrate the ongoing reformation and renewal of the church through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the primary reason why we appoint the sanctuary with red paraments and banners, and why many of you have worn red today. Red is a symbol of the purifying and sanctifying fire of the Holy Spirit. Celebrating the Reformation is about anticipating the ongoing reforming power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the life of the church, and in the life of this congregation, St. Mark’s.

Yet one might well ask, “What do the events of 1517 mean for us today?” What could a late medieval German theologian named Martin Luther possibly have to say of relevance in the 21st century? The Reformation continues to be relevant because, like the medieval church and its people, we are always in danger of our own sinfulness and our own attempts to justify and save ourselves. 507 years later, we remain in need of God’s forgiving grace that frees us from our own sinful selves. Grace alone frees us to use our moral and intellectual capabilities in service to others. Grace frees us to live unreservedly in the everyday with a faith active in love toward our neighbor.

Today’s reading from Jeremiah speaks of God’s promise of a new covenant. Jeremiah writes, “*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*” Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant is radical; God’s law will be written on the human heart. No longer will people be justified by works of the law but by the law of God’s grace as a gift written upon their hearts.

In today’s reading from Romans, Paul writes, “*Since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption of Jesus Christ.*” God’s grace is the gift and work of Christ we can never earn through our own works. For Lutherans, this message is especially important because it was Martin Luther who rediscovered the gospel of grace that would change our understanding of the gospel. Rather than seeking to earn our own way into forgiveness through endless works, Luther rediscovered the central message of the gospel: Grace is

about what God does for us in Jesus Christ. It is not about what we do. Grace is a gift given to us, setting us free to respond with faith active in love for our neighbor.

In today's gospel, Jesus' says, "*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*" These words are the promise of spiritual liberty from sin and death. They are the promise that in believing the truth about him, his cross and resurrection, we are freed from the power of sin and death, released to live in the freedom of Christian service to this world. However, these words have also been spiritualized, making freedom in Christ a spiritual reality often removed from daily life. We are freed by Christ in order that we might use our freedom in the everyday of life for others.

In Galatians (5:1) Paul writes, "*For freedom Christ has set you free,*" revealing the purpose of the freedom Christ gives. Christ sets us free for freedom – for living with true freedom in God and for our neighbor. Yet too often today, we have equated freedom solely with freedoms guaranteed by governments and laws. Freedom in Christ, however, means recognizing that such human-made freedoms are always partial, each freedom guaranteed by a human-made law that humans can also rescind and take away from individuals. Throughout history, human laws have guaranteed freedom to some, while excluding or even oppressing others. The freedom that Jesus promises cannot be understood in this way. "*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed*" points to a freedom that can never be taken away from anyone.

What makes Christ's promise of freedom so powerful throughout history is that the freedom Christ gives liberates us from sin and death – from all of the systems, "isms," and rulers of this world that seek to oppress and control humanity. The grace of God in Christ Jesus forgives and renews us, freeing us to live with a faith active in love for others. We cannot free ourselves from sin, and so grace is God's free gift in Christ, a promise written upon our hearts so that all who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life. Faith the evidence of God's grace already alive in us.

Yet the freedom that Jesus promises continues to be misunderstood today. We continue to make laws that grant freedom to some and captivity to others. We continue to decide who is free and who not. We conflate civil and legal freedoms with the freedom Christ. They are not the same. Freedoms, as we have seen, can be capriciously taken away. Freedom in Christ – the freedom from sin and death – is God's eternal promise of grace through Jesus' cross and resurrection. Jesus liberates humanity from all that oppresses and separates us from God and from one another. Though early Christians had no legal freedoms, they knew they already possessed a freedom in Christ that had set them free from Rome's imperial and colonizing power. Freed from Ceasar and the fear of

death, they lived in the freedom of their Lord Jesus and the hope of eternal life.

Jesus' words, "*If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed,*" remind us that our communal life as a nation and our sacred life together as a church, are always in constant need of the reforming grace of God in Jesus Christ. Just as there is no perfect person, there is no perfect nation, church, or institution. Christ frees us as people to continually reform the world and our relationships with the love and forgiveness of Christ.

The trouble happens when our political commitments become indistinguishable from our religious ones, making our faith no more liberating or transformative than our contemporary political platforms. Trouble comes when we deify American culture conflating the kingdom of God with our political system. Trouble happens when we deify our leaders as saviors rather than seeking the grace of God that forgives and frees us from every power, institution, and leader in this world. God's reforming and freeing gospel of grace needs to touch every part of our lives, our community, our nation, and our world. This gospel we celebrate today is given for the whole world; it is meant to touch every aspect of our lives.

In 1520, Martin Luther wrote at the beginning of a small book titled, *The Freedom of a Christian*: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." To be a Christian is to be freed from every power in this world, making us subject to none but Christ. To be a Christian is to be freed by grace, making us faithful servants to all our neighbors.

Psalm 46 was the inspiration for Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Psalm 46:5 reads, "*God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved.*" God is in the midst of the city in you and in this church that has found freedom in Christ to love, welcome, and serve all our neighbors. We are freed in Christ for a purpose: to be Christ's hands and voices in the midst of the city each and every day.

God is in the midst of the city in you and in this church. Let God's grace renew in your heart again today with the most powerful freedom you will ever know: Freedom in Christ.

This is God's ongoing reformation in you: You are freed in Christ so that you might change to world for good. You are freed in Christ that you might work for the freedom of your neighbor who is oppressed, weak, hungry, and a stranger.

For freedom Christ has set you free. God is in the midst of the city in you. Amen.