

Rev. Dan Welch Reformation Day (Observed) 10-27-24 Text- John 8: 31- 36

It was Independence Day! But there were no fireworks, sparklers, or parade floats anywhere in sight. There weren't any barbecues, baseball games, or concerts to be found, either. On this day there weren't any patriotic songs like "God Bless America" or "America the Beautiful." It was Independence Day, but it wasn't even the Fourth of July in celebration of that great year of 1776. No, this Independence Day began in the year 1517 with the Reformation; when a German monk by the name of Martin Luther announced to the world that he was on a journey toward freedom. His declaration of independence was driven in part by these words of our text: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (8:32)

The liberating truth that sets sinners free is the cry of our Collect for today. There we prayed, "Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth..." For years Luther was anything but steadfast in the truth that frees. He was a very unlikely candidate to sound the battle cry for independence. For years he had known only captivity and enslavement. He was in his own personal prison. Luther felt obligated to spend entire weeks without food, without speaking, without seeing the light of day. This hardly seems like freedom, but the fireworks of freedom began when this one monk of the Augustinian Order took hammer in hand and on October 31, 1517, and posted his 95 theses on the Wittenberg Castle Church door. This was his Independence Day! Finally, Martin Luther knew the truth as Jesus declared it in our text and the truth made him free. Let's turn back to our text from John chapter 8.

Jesus said, "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (8:32). At that time, the Jews who were listening proudly insisted, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone!" Talk about living in denial! Did they mean to say that they *were*'t slaves under the Pharaohs in Egypt before Moses led them out? Or that they weren't slaves when the Assyrians carried off as captives the people of the Northern Kingdom? Or when the Babylonians did the same to those in Southern Kingdom? How about when General Pompey and his legions marched into Jerusalem to claim it for Rome in 63 B.C.? 'We've never been enslaved to anyone' is a flat-out lie and denial of the facts. It's a dream, a delusion. But we see the same prisoners in denial today- the drug addict who won't admit to his destructive dependence; the woman who refuses to talk about her three-month affair; the businessman who rejects help to stop his addiction to work, work, work; the person who listens to the devil's lies, "Go ahead and live however you want to live. Just do what feels good, because after all it's your

life, it's your body. Forget about what the Bible says. Live it up!" We see ourselves caught up in the same denial, the same dream, the same delusion these Jews had whenever we make up an excuse and refuse to listen to God's Word and live as though His Law doesn't apply to us. The truth is, none of us can say, 'We've never been enslaved to anyone.' Jesus hammers home this hard reality when He says, "everyone whoever commits a sin is a slave to sin" (34)

That's us. Just like Luther. Locked in habits we can't beat and bound in a bondage we can't break. The devil wants to lock us up and throw away the key. And by the way he could care less whether we think he's real or not! He's full of all kinds of deceptions and it doesn't bother him in the least if people deceive themselves into believing he doesn't even exist. It's like a prisoner who convinces himself he can escape prison because he thinks the guard is no longer there. His wrong thinking doesn't change reality! If it's the truth that sets us free, as Jesus says, then it's the *liar* who captures and kills and he has lots of ways of doing it. In the same chapter as our text, Jesus describes this liar, the devil: "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him" (44).

Martin Luther knew this voice as well. He writes in *A Mighty Fortress*, "The old evil foe now means deadly woe. Deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight; on earth is not his equal."

On the other hand, John's Gospel is full of fireworks as it celebrates this destiny-altering news: Jesus Christ is the world's only liberating truth. Listen to what John says about the Father's only Son and our only Savior. "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, Who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). Listen to what Jesus says: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (14:6).

Jesus delivers the Truth that sets people free at last! To Nicodemus, caged in the hopeless laws of rabbinic Judaism, He says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him" (3:17). To the woman at Jacob's well, bound to one broken relationship after another, He says, "The water I give... will become... a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14). To the man born in the prison of blindness He says, "Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam" (9:7). To Mary and Martha, locked in grief over the death of their brother Lazarus, He says, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." (11:25)

Our freedom march began when Jesus was bound and taken to Annas, the high priest. He was slapped, spit upon, and sent to Caiaphas. Then, blindfolded, He was struck in the face with fists and beaten by guards. The next morning,

He was taken to Pilate, who passed Him off to Herod. Herod dressed Him in a purple robe. Back before Pilate, He was crowned with thorns, stripped, and scourged, just short of death. Struck and spit upon again, He was led outside the city to die. Finally, He was stretched out on two pieces of wood, and three iron spikes were hammered into His flesh. His friends had run away. His possessions had been gambled away. His strength was slipping away. Even His Father had turned away. All He had left were the words "It is finished" (19:30). But with these words our bondage was broken, the sacrifice completed, death defeated, paradise restored. "It is finished!"

Was this a cry of defeat? No way! This is the Savior's cry of victory- "Let freedom ring!"

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ means that we are liberated from the liar, the devil and that our prison doors are wide open. Luther experienced this truth and wrote: "When I understood it, and the light of the Gospel came into my soul, the gates of paradise opened, and I walked through."

This same liberating power sets **us** free from the condemnation of our sin, from the pain of our past, from worry about our future. No one can take this freedom from us, no law can stop it, and no power on earth or in hell can destroy it. Again, let's listen to Luther: "And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife, though these all be gone, our victory has been won; the kingdom ours remaineth!"

The message of God's freedom in Jesus, rediscovered by Martin Luther and celebrated on this Reformation Sunday is loud and clear- "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!" Free in every way- full, final, forever! This is **our** Independence Day! Amen!