

25 October 2020
Festival of the Reformation

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Freedom of a Christian”

Text: John 8:31-36 (Romans 3:19-28; Psalm 46)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Three years ago, 2017, the world celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was a big deal. As I said, the *world* celebrated it, not just the church. Even the non-religious and those who don't really appreciate Luther's theology found in the Reformation the seeds of much of what they think is good and valuable in the world today; making our society what it is - from the division of church and state, to individual choice, to education, and lots more. Luther was hailed as the hero of modernity, of the common man against the machine. *Not really what Luther was going for . . .* but Luther is one of those people who wrote so much, against so many, and in so many ways, that he is claimed by almost everyone for their cause and interpreted in all kinds of ways.

That was three years ago. This year, not much going on, as far as I've heard. The 503rd anniversary of the Reformation just doesn't have the same ring to it!

But I would argue that this year, 2020, the 500th anniversary of the year 1520, is far more important than 2017. For while 1517 and the 95 Theses get all the press for getting the Reformation started, they really weren't that theologically important. What came later was. And what came later was 1520, the year Luther wrote his “three great treatises”: *The Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and the one that I want to focus on today, *The Freedom of a Christian*. These three writings advanced the theology of the Reformation and Scriptural teaching much more than the 95 Theses.

But today, I want to focus on that third writing, *The Freedom of a Christian*, not because of Luther! But because of the Holy Gospel that you just heard. The Holy Gospel in which Jesus talks about **the freedom of a Christian**. The Holy Gospel in which Jesus said: *If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. And, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

But what is this freedom that we have in Christ? What does it look like?

Some would like that freedom to be a freedom from all restraint. A radical individuality

which means that you can do whatever you want, live however you want, believe whatever you want, say whatever you want, and no one can tell you otherwise. Because you're free.

There are two problems with that. First, Jesus said that *if you abide in my word*, then you are free. And then this: *everyone who commits sin is a slave - to sin*. So if in your freedom, in your individuality, you are going against the Word of God and sinning, you are, in fact, not free at all, but a slave - to sin. A slave to those sinful urges in you that you are pushing you; that you are serving and satisfying and obeying. Yet sadly, that is how many people today see their freedom: they are free to sin. Even Christians sometimes think this, because, after all, Jesus will forgive me. So I don't have to worry about how much I sin.

Now, it shouldn't take much time or convincing for you to realize that's not what Jesus meant at all. That's a very small grain of truth in a great big bag of error! And it's damaging - to yourself and others. And it has (to use a phrase from the apostle Paul) caused many to shipwreck their faith.

So Luther put it this way; the proper way to look at the Christian life:

A Christian is the freest lord of all, subject to none.

And yet at the same time,

A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Those two statements sound like they contradict each other, but they don't. They're both true. And they're both important and important to keep together. For **the first without the second** leads to license and the thinking that I can do whatever I want, even sin. But **the second without the first** leads to legalism and the thinking that my salvation depends on what I do. And we see both of those things in our world and in some churches today. But put together, and kept together, they perfectly describe what Jesus was talking about in the Holy Gospel, and how we live our lives as Christians.

For in Christ, abiding in Him and His Word, you are free. Free from the guilt of your sin. Free from having to earn your place in the kingdom of God. Free from the condemnation and punishment and hell that your sins deserve. Free from having to justify yourself. Free from the accusations of the evil one. Free from the fear of death. For all your sin and guilt were put on Him on the cross. He wanted it! And so also He took the condemnation, punishment, and hell your sins deserved. He atoned for your sin, died in your place, and then broke the bonds of the grave and set you free. He did it all, and so you are free. Justified. A child of God in Him. There is nothing for you to do for this. Nothing you *can* do. It is, as we heard Paul say today, a gift. From Him to you. From His cross, through the word and water of Baptism, to you. A new you with a new life. *The Son has set you free, and you are free indeed!* 100%. Subject to none. You will live and reign with Him forever. As Jesus said from the cross: *It is finished* (John 19:30).

But what now? Sin as much as you want? Indulge your every urge and desire? Of course not. The kingdom of God is not a kingdom of sin. To do that, as Jesus said, is returning to your slavery to sin. It is you being controlled and driven by your old, sinful man and not being the new man, the born again person, that you are, that Christ has made you.

Rather, Christ has set you free to not be that way anymore; to not be a slave of sin. To be free not to serve your radical, individual self, but to serve your neighbor. In love. As Christ did. As Christ loved you. For the Son of God didn't have to come down from heaven, take your sins and the sins of the world upon Himself, and die with them. **But He did.** In love. He was free from the Law but freely made Himself subject to the Law. He had no sin but took your sin. He was rich but made Himself poor. All for you. The God who is free to do anything, and who *can* do anything, did that! *For you! To set you free.*

Which really is mind-blowing. For why would God do that for Luther? He was nothing but sin! Why would He do that for you? You're no prize! Why would He do that for me? Who continues to fall short and fail in so many ways? Why for the Pharisees who kept opposing Him, for the disciples who were so frustratingly slow to understand, for those who put Him on the cross? Because that's what love does. The God who is love.

And that love has been given to you, forgiving your sins, making you a child of God, giving you the promise of everlasting life. And as that love lives in you, it lives not according to your old, sinful man, but like Christ - giving itself in service to others. Loved ones, family, friends, neighbors, *and enemies* alike. For the Jesus who did all for you, now says to you: *Love one another as I have loved you* (John 13:34-35).

And you can, because you are FREE in Christ. If you had to do something to save yourself, you couldn't serve your neighbor - you'd have to worry about you. But if you don't have to worry about you, you are **FREE** to worry about your neighbor and her needs. You are **FREE** to serve him, forgive him, help her, love her. Putting their needs above your own, as Jesus did for you.

Not that it's easy! No one ever said it would be. Faith isn't easy. But it is good. For to live like this is to live the life for which you were created. The life God meant for you. It's Satan who doesn't want you to live that life, but to live for yourself, convincing you that that's the way to happiness and fulfillment. Whatever you think is right, is right. Whatever you think is good, is good. Whatever you think is best, is best. For Christ set you free, didn't He? *Didn't He?* So enjoy your freedom!

But as many find out, what the devil calls freedom is really slavery. Which shouldn't surprise us. The devil is a liar. And He lies when he tells you that living like Jesus says is really slavery! You have to do this, you have to do that, you don't get to do what you want to do, God is a "no fun" God. You don't get to do what everyone else is doing. You

have to obey your parents. *That's no good!* . . . **But maybe it is good.** Maybe what we want isn't good. Maybe my urges and desires are self-destructive and so to follow them . . . And so satan drives people to despair and hopelessness. And then people dive into more sin, looking for something good. Or they give up. They withdraw from everyone, or even commit suicide.

And you've fallen for satan's lies, as have I. We've lived as slaves and not in the freedom Christ won for us and has for us. But we do not despair or lose hope. We come here, and are set free again. The chains of sin snapped off of us with the Absolution, the joy of our freedom proclaimed in the Gospel, and as we are fed with Jesus Himself, the Bread of Life, to raise us and strengthen us to live in His freedom. *Real* freedom. The freedom to be the child of God you are.

And with that freedom then comes this too: peace and joy. **Peace** knowing that your present and your future are secure in Jesus, and so you really have nothing to worry about or fear. And **joy** that your life has more meaning than just serving yourself and trying to get as much as you can. That's pretty empty and gets really old really fast. There must be more to life than that, many hope. And there is. When you're a child of God. When you know the freedom of a Christian.

So if you're lacking peace and joy in your life, maybe you've been focused too inward, too individually. And when you look there, you won't find what you're looking for. Instead, look out. Outside yourself. To God in faith, and to your neighbor in love. And you'll know that joy that Jesus Himself knew, *who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God* (Hebrews 12:2). Now, cross and joy are two things that normally don't go together! But they do for Jesus. Who was not looking inward, but outward. Who looked to His Father in faith, and toward you in love. And He was filled with **joy**, even was faced with the cross. And even on the cross, was able to die in **peace**.

Sound good? Sound like what you're looking for? Under the crosses you bear? In this year 2020 which so many folks can't wait to be over and wish they could delete from history? Maybe we're thinking about it all wrong. Maybe our lack of peace and joy is from our slavery to sin and our own wishes and desires.

So instead, refocus. Focus **inward**, your sight is all of out whack and you won't see properly. But focus **outward**, and your vision might just be 20/20. To see clearly the love of God for you in Jesus and His cross, to see clearly the victory that is yours in His resurrection, to see clearly all the gifts of God that are yours in Christ Jesus, and then to see clearly that joy that is not in what you get but in what you give. How God is using you to love and provide for others. You, as a child of God, living in the image of your Father.

That's how we can have peace and joy even (as we sang in the Psalm earlier) though *the earth gives way*, though *the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea*, though *waters roar and foam* and *mountains tremble*, and even in the face of the *desolations God has brought upon the earth* - like Covid-19. That is so awful and this year is so awful that nothing good will come out of it, right? . . . That's what they said about the cross, too.

No, even in the face of all this, Christians are **free** to live in faith and love, in peace and joy, and proclaim: *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress!* And as Luther wrote, a mighty one at that.

Luther wrote about that freedom 500 years ago, and people have needed to hear about that freedom every year since; and maybe this year more than most. But Jesus proclaimed it some 1,500 years before that, and it was God's plan for you even before the creation of the world! That you live in faith and love, peace and joy, as His dearly loved child. For you have been set free by the Son of God. And *if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.