

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 31, 2021 (Reformation Sunday)
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

Reformation Sunday is all about freedom.

It's all OVER the readings for today. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And they answered, "What do you mean, 'You will be MADE free'?"

Did you catch their denial there? "We have never been slaves to ANYONE," they said. REALLY? I guess they forgot about their people's rather LENGTHY bondage in Egypt. Remember Moses and "Pharaoh, let my people go." Remember the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea, the Ten Commandments, ring any bells? Oh, and then there was that small matter of the Assyrian and Babylonian Exiles, where the Jewish people were conquered and kicked out of Judah and Israel for generations.

But "Oh, no, 'We've never been slaves to anyone.'" As the saying goes, "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt."

And IN that DENIAL, the question becomes timeless — "What do you mean, 'You will be MADE free'?" It's also OUR question on this Reformation Sunday. We have been freed by God's grace through faith (we SAY because we memorized it in confirmation). We have been freed from allegiance to the pope and other earthly rulers (we SAY because we know our Lutheran history). We live in the land of the free and the home of the brave (we SAY believing that LIVING in the United States MEANS that you are free). We're ALREADY free; we don't NEED to be "MADE free," we say. THIS gospel must be about somebody else.

And yet, we don't FEEL especially free. One of the ironies of this twenty-first century is that with all of our technological marvels — cell phones, laptops, e-mail and the internet — all advertised as giving us more freedom, we feel LESS free. We constantly text, and snap, and check and update our facebook, and tweet our IMPORTANT message of less than 150 characters. We take our cell phones with us on vacation, and to the LAKE, and to the movies. We always have our phones nearby just in CASE someone calls us.

But since we are ALWAYS AVAILABLE, we are NEVER REALLY free.

One time, Wendy and I were at a movie and a guy's cell phone rang, and he ANSWERED it, RIGHT THERE in the THEATER. Now if you've been around people using cell phones in public, you know that they don't WHISPER; they actually talk LOUDER than normal. That was this guy. "Hello. ... Hi there! ... Where am I? I'm at a movie! What are you doing?" RIGHT THERE DURING the MOVIE. The rest of us couldn't BELIEVE it. WHY? Why did he even ANSWER it? Why couldn't he just turn it off?

Since we are ALWAYS available to other people, we are NEVER TRULY free.

With all our technology, we are more CONNECTED now than at ANY time in the history of the WORLD. At least that's what we TELL ourselves. But we TOO are in DENIAL. We COMMUNICATE more than ever, but we are NOT connected. All those mindless texts and tweets, all those facebook friend requests to people we haven't seen in decades, are ATTEMPTS to CONNECT with somebody, to FIND a friend, to get ONE message that really MATTERS. But, in spite of all our communication, we are more LONELY now than we have EVER BEEN. We don't FEEL especially FREE.

We need a Reformation. FREEDOM is what the Reformation was all about.

From Paul's declaration that we have all been JUSTIFIED by grace, to Luther's hammering his theses to the Wittenburg Church door, to remind us that GRACE REIGNS supreme, it was ALL about

FREEDOM. The whole REFORM-THING was intended to tell us that, in the end, we don't need to DO ANYTHING – SAY anything, ACCOMPLISH anything, or BUY anything – to EARN God's love. The Reformation told us that we already HAVE God's love.

Most of the Church's PROBLEMS – and, indeed, the WORLD'S problems – START when we FORGET that – that we already HAVE love, and worth, and dignity, as a GIFT from God, and INSTEAD try to EARN it, or WORSE, TAKE it from someone else.

It's about freedom.

This is why we STILL CELEBRATE Reformation Sunday today. Not JUST because Lutherans are AWESOME. (We are, I'm a little biased.) But we STILL need to REFORM, to CHANGE this world.

It's about freedom. We don't FEEL especially FREE.

Did you know, did you KNOW, that if someone posts something online that offends you, we are free to NOT comment on it, and to MOVE ON with our lives? It's true! We are FREE to do that.

But more serious is the end result of the way we talk to each other. We are living in a time when a lunatic can walk into a shopping mall, or a grocery store, or a school, or even a place of worship, and begin shooting. It makes you wonder – what is this world coming to? There is SO MUCH hate. And the way we talk is so ANGRY and REACTIVE.

But the message of this Reformation Sunday is that we are FREE to stand AGAINST that, to STAND UP to the vitriolic rhetoric, and the acts of hate it spawns. We are free to live in PEACE with our neighbors. We are free to SERVE, instead of criticize. We are free to FORGIVE and BE FORGIVEN.

It's about freedom.

There's NO SECURITY when our demons are INSIDE the walls WITH us. There is only ONE strong tower, only ONE NAME by which we are saved, only ONE LORD AND SAVIOR who MAKES us FREE. Free to live generously, free to take risks, free to TRULY LIVE.

It's about freedom.

Sometimes we might wonder if the words and deeds of the Reformers 500 years ago still matter today, but it's REALLY STILL about FREEDOM. In Christ, we are FREE. Free to risk, and serve, and help, and care, and try, and struggle, and laugh, and all the rest. We are free to LOVE, JUST as God loves us.

This is Reformation Sunday, and it's ALL about freedom. And it always was. As Jesus said, "If the SON makes you free, you will be free indeed." Amen.