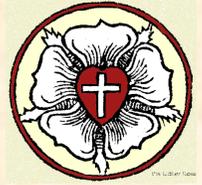


FREE INDEED
REFORMATION SUNDAY 2012
Romans 3:19-28 & John 8:31-36



I. INTRODUCTION

The Liberator strides through the halls of the prison. His wounds are fresh, but the battle is won. He shouts "Come out!" and the doors spring open. You are free! I've come to release you from this prison and give you gifts. There is food, clothing and riches outside in abundance; I give them to you freely! Your ruler was a tyrant but I have vanquished him, I've destroyed him. He's not coming back. Come out, your free!"

The doors stand wide open. The tyrant and his guards are gone. The Liberator has done all the work to release these people from their prison. "Come out!" He calls again. "You're free!"

A few heads poke out of cells, but no one enters the halls. A voice filled with doubtful suspicion cries out from the cell, "What do you want from me?" "Nothing!" responds the Liberator. "As I have already said, I will say again. I have not come to take from you, but to give you freedom and so much more. Come out! You're free!"

A voice from another cell, a man of pedigree chimes in: "What do you mean, we're free? We've never considered ourselves to be anything but free in the first place. What makes us any freer now?" The Liberator replies, "Have you been in prison so long that bondage is all you know? You've been told that it is freedom, but it is not. You are in a cell, but I've flung the doors wide open. Come out! You're free!"

Across the hallway, an intelligent man speaks using reasonable rejection: "Thank you for your offer, but we have elected to remain. You see, we've thought about this long and hard, and we've decided that you don't exist. Therefore, your freedom isn't real. After consultation, we've decided to remain in the cell. We know that we're going to die here and have no hope beyond that, but we'll make the most of the time that we have here in prison." The Liberator cries out, "Whether you believe me or not, the battle is fought, I am here and the door is open. Don't rely on your logical conclusions! Come out! Be free!"

Next comes a surprisingly joyous voice from one practicing syncretism: "O thank so much for your kind offer, but there is no need! You see, we've made our own liberator. We've fashioned him out of straw and clay and our own ideas and desires, and he's been our liberator for quite some time now. Of course, we don't want to exclude you, either; so from now on we'll consider our liberator to be just like you. What a great day it is!" To this the Liberator declares, "But your liberator is not like me. He is only as free as those who have made him, and he is only inside the cell and cannot get out. Don't put your trust in straw and clay and your own wisdom, for all of that has kept you in your cage. I am no dead brick; I have conquered your tyrant. Come out! Be free!"

There's some murmuring further down the hallway, and a voice emerges from darkened hearts and veiled blindness, it says, "Our ruler warned us about you! He said that if you showed up here, you would make us give up all that we have to follow you. We're not coming out!" "And what would I have you give up?" demands the Liberator. "I desire that you give up the rags that you wear in exchange for new clothes. I desire that you give up hunger and starvation in exchange for nourishing food. I desire that you give up darkness, disease, death and decay; in exchange, I give you light and life forever! Consider the source of the warning: The one who warned you was the ruler who kept you in your chains, and he's a liar from start to finish. I've come to save you! Come out! You are free!"

From the darkness behind another open door, another voice: "We are so happy that you came, and we see the door wide open! We look forward to joining you in the freedom that lies outside. In fact, as we have been looking forward to it for centuries, we are busy chipping away at this wall with our spoons. We haven't made a dent yet; but it's only a matter of time until we make our escape by our own hand." But their voice of futile effort soon fades away and the sound is replaced by the scraping of silverware on granite. The Liberator

shouts: "Put down the spoons and cease your efforts! The door is open because I've done all the work! Come out! Come forth now! You are free!"

The Liberator remains, calling for all to hear. He continues to warn them of the death they face in that prison. He warns them that their efforts will not save them. He warns them of the lies of the ruler who kept them bound. And all the while, he calls them forth to have life, to be free.

But again and again, voices emerge from the darkness, giving one reason or another why they will not leave. Why do so many look for excuses not to be free?

But here and there, it happens. From one cell or another, a poor wretched one emerges. Blinking in the brilliant light, he would fall and fail if the Liberator did not hold him up and keep him on the journey. One by one they come, and after a while a crowd of former prisoners stands outside. They are clothed and fed. They are strengthened and enlivened. They have new life within them, because the Liberator has set them free. They need never return to the prison again.

And yet, as absurd as it sounds, some of them do. Some of them return to their cells. It may be because they just like the darkness and the life of the cell better. It may be that they just won't trust the Liberator's ongoing kindness. It may be that they hear the voices of former comrades calling them back, and they elect to join the old club once again. It's a strange phenomenon, because many of those who return believe they are still liberated. "I spent some time with the Liberator. I heard him speak. I ate and wore his clothes. Because I met him that day, I am free. Sure, I'm back in the prison with the same old stuff. My clothes have returned to rags and I'm starving again. But I once listened to the voice of the Liberator and I was with him then, so I must still be free." It's a terrible delusion, for they returned to prison and slipped chains back onto their wrists. And all the while, the cell door still stands open, and the Liberator still calls.

Those outside continue in his care. They remain fed and clothed, healthy and free. They're free because the Liberator has come, and the Liberator remains. He's fought, he's set them free, and he will continue to protect and preserve them, forever!

II. THE SON WHO SETS YOU FREE, HAS SET YOU FREE INDEED!

Of course, the Liberator of our allegory is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. He has defeated sin, death and the devil. They sought to keep you enslaved and lost forever. The risen Christ still bears the wounds on His body-the nail prints in His hands and the spear-pierce in His side, for these testify that He has won the victory and crushed the head of the enemy.

And now, victorious, the Son of God cries out to the world, ***"Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."*** There is no better news: Once the world was lost forever to the bondage of sin and death. Now, the Son of God offers freedom for all.

Yet, out of the dark prison house of sin, the objections still emerge against the Lord and His cross. For one reason or another, people just don't want to be free.

Those in the Gospel lesson objected that they needed no liberation, because they had never been imprisoned in the first place: ***"We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?"*** (Jn. 8:32) To which Jesus responded, ***"Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin"*** (Jn. 8:34). No matter what their heritage they still sinned and were slaves to sin; and Jesus sought to set them free. So He called out "Come out! Be free!" with the words, ***"If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."***

At the time of Luther, the leading objection was this: ***"The Lord Jesus has died for our sins-to help us escape the prison of hell, and that is good. Now, we will break ourselves out of our cell to meet Him by our prayers and our good works and payments."*** It is the equivalent to digging through the granite wall with a spoon

while the cell door is wide open behind them. Thus the Lord declares in the epistle for today, ***"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin"*** (Romans 3:20). In other words, no works - no deeds can save you. But the next verse says this: ***"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed."*** There is a way to freedom from sin, and Romans 3 goes on to declare that this is found in Jesus. So the Lord still cries out today, "If you try to save yourselves by your own works and prayers and decisions, you'll never be free. But if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Other objections arise in our present day, and you've heard them all before. Many have decided that the Lord just doesn't exist, and therefore His offer of salvation and freedom is imaginary; but no matter how much man insists that the Lord does not exist, He yet remains. Many others have created another god; and the growing fad is to say that any god is just another face for Jesus. But the difference is clear: Jesus is the true Son of God become flesh to rescue all from the prison house of sin; all those other gods are dead things that have been created while doing time. Others shun the freedom and eternal life because they are too much in love with their sin, or too afraid of giving it up-whatever "it" might be: immorality, greed, materialism, self-esteem, whatever. Yet all of these things they cling to only isolate and separate. Immorality only leaves one used and lonelier. Greed insists on having more than others, which loses friends fast. Pride insists on being better than the rest, and so it shuns others. First, they isolate; then, they kill. They may feel like freedom, but they are chains that delight in destroying.

The Savior calls out, ***"If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."***

Why the blindness? Why do so many seek to remain in prison? Why do so many shun the light and the freedom of forgiveness? This tells us something about how lost man is. Sin is not like a pair of socks-something on the outside that we can just take off; no, sin infects us to the very core of our soul. By nature, we are not good people who happen to have been attacked by sin. By nature, we are sinful. In that sinfulness, we are so blinded that we cannot see the danger we are in. We are dead that there is no way we can make ourselves free or alive again. In that sinfulness, we naturally choose to go against God's will. Left to ourselves, by nature we will choose the prison of sin every time.

But the Lord calls out, ***"If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."*** His cry of freedom is His powerful Word, and His Word grants the grace and faith needed to be free. He has conquered sin, death and the devil at the cross. He has flung wide open the gates of prison; and now, by His powerful Word, He calls all to freedom. He once commanded, "Lazarus, come forth," and a dead man came out of His tomb. He has declared His forgiveness and life to you, and so He has raised you from the dead just like Lazarus.

The Lord offers this salvation to all who hear His Word. But not all who hear will be saved. His Word gives them the faith that they need to be saved, but He does not force anyone to leave the prison house of sin.

It is His Word that delivers the forgiveness, faith and freedom. Added to water, His Word sets free in Holy Baptism; added to bread and wine, His Word strengthens the faith of the believer. Therefore, it is both a great privilege and imperative for the Church to continue to proclaim His Word.

This brings us to one more warning, for Reformation is not only about the salvation of the individual; it is about the Reformation of the Church. "The Church is always under reformation," said Luther; it must always make sure it remains steadfast to that Word which frees sinners from prison by the grace of Jesus Christ. Reformation is never more necessary than today.

This is true because so many church leaders and church bodies have surrendered to the objections of the world. "You don't believe that Jesus is the only way to eternal life, do you? If so how we can agree with you? Or we will still call ourselves a 'church,' but we will only talk about life in this world since we really don't believe in eternal life or damnation." Or this one "You call yourself a Christian but yet you question my

immorality. That's not very Christian like! We make tolerance the high virtue and promote that perversion as good.

Woe to the church and the preacher who declare that sin and freedom go together. This is a terrible sin, for it assures sinners that they are free when they are not. It tells them they are forgiven and need not repent when they remain condemned for their sin. So they mislead the sinner not to heaven but to hell, for the freedom they preach is no freedom at all.

This is why the church's Reformation is never an innovation away from the Gospel, but always a return to its pure teaching. This is why, by the grace of God, we continue to preach His Law which warns of the consequences of sin. And this is why, by the grace of God, we preach Christ crucified- Christ who lived for you, Christ who died for you and rose again. Christ who, by His Word, declares to you today, "I have set you free from sin. And if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed."

We declare this message, because we have been set free by it. On this Reformation Sunday, rejoice in this great freedom, which the Lord grants you by these words: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are free, you are free indeed, in Jesus name, Amen!

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
AMEN.*