

Sermon for October 29, 2017 – Reformation 500

John 8:31-36 (EHV)

Theme: **The Scriptures are the key. . .**

- 1) . . . to unlocking the truth,
- 2) . . . to being set free.

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. ³² You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³ “We are Abraham’s descendants,” they answered, “and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be set free?’” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ But a slave does not remain in the family forever. A son does remain forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free.

Are you free? As citizens of the United States of America, we’d like to think so. Doesn’t our nation’s very Constitution and Bill of Rights protect our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? We elect our own government and are slaves to no one – doesn’t this fact pretty much define what it means to be free?

Politically speaking, we may consider ourselves free, but how about spiritually? Are you free from feelings of regret, guilt and shame? Are you free to accept who you are and be at peace with your past because you know you are forgiven? Are you free to live a happy life – unconcerned of what disasters tomorrow might bring because you know your future is certain? Are you truly free – totally confident that you are at peace with God and will most certainly inherit eternal life when you die?

“Pastor,” some of you might be thinking, “No one can be that free.” Actually, they can. How so? Because this is exactly the kind of freedom God offers us in the Gospel message of his Son. This is one reason why faithful Christians, like Martin Luther, are so passionate about preserving every Word of Scripture – even when threatened with death. And, having experienced this wonderful freedom themselves, faithful Christians want others to have it too.

And where do we find this wonderful freedom? As we will learn today, **The Scriptures are the key. . . 1) to unlocking the truth, 2) to being set free.**

Part One: The Scriptures are the key to unlocking the truth.

Our sermon text finds Jesus teaching a crowd of Jews that He is the Light of the world: that is to say our revealer of truth and Savior from sin. The Pharisees challenged him, saying that, without witnesses, his testimony about himself is invalid. Jesus answered this challenge by pointing out that both Scripture and God the Father himself testify to the fact that He is the Messiah. Jesus

went on to prophesy the kind of death He would die and, as Jesus spoke, many of the Jews started to put their faith in Him. Jesus encourages them in their newly found faith by saying:

“If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. ³² You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Our society seems to really struggle with the idea of truth – and sometimes for good reason. It seems as if news stories are constantly changing and scientific experts are always challenging one another’s opinions. For example, I grew up learning that, due to high levels of cholesterol, a person should really limit how many eggs they should eat. Now we are told that the cholesterol in eggs isn’t all that bad for you. “What is truth?” our society asks with Pilate. And hasn’t every era asked the same thing?

Martin Luther struggled with the question: “What is truth?” You see, he grew up in a world that taught that Jesus is a stern judge, demanding that we earn our own righteousness to get to heaven. Now, even though God does demand perfection, he certainly does not demand it as a way to earn heaven. But, Jesus did say: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*ⁱ This truth made Luther anxious and depressed. Why? Because Luther was conscious of his sins.

Since Luther knew that he could never live up to God’s holy standard of perfection, he began to despair of himself and even hate the LORD. He looked to the church of his day for help and guidance as to how he could get right with God. The church told him to try harder, be better, punish himself, pay for his sins. . . but none of these things actually helped. He still felt as burdened and depressed as ever. Truth be told, the more “religious” he became, the more enslaved, hopeless and fearful he felt. Why was that? Because Luther was told to look to himself for salvation, just like people today are told to look to themselves, who they are and what they have to overcome their depressions.

“You are a good person – you just need to tap into your great potential to overcome adversity. Trust in yourself. Be whoever you want to be.” This is the message of today’s world and, as nice and liberating as it sounds, it is not truth. It will not free you from the restlessness, guilt and fear you feel in your heart. Like many Christians before and after him, Luther was led to discover this truth. How? By finding Christ in the Scriptures.

While still living in a monastery, Luther confessed to his superior, Johann von Staupitz, his fear and growing hatred toward God because of his inability to be righteous. Staupitz told Luther to turn to Jesus and trust in his forgiveness. Even though Luther listened to his superior, he didn’t quite understand what he meant, so Staupitz put Luther on a path where he would need to study the Scriptures daily to gain understanding.

And what happened during this study? He came to see the truth: first of all that, in spite of what the world says, the human heart is not good, but full of evil and sin. Luther saw the truth that “trying hard” will not save us from God’s wrath because God demands perfection – something no human can attain on his own. Luther saw the truth that, regardless of how good God’s law is, we are unable to keep it, and – if left on our own – are doomed to everlasting punishment in hell.

But these aren't the only truths he discovered in Scripture. Reading passages that talk about God's great love, Luther discovered that the LORD takes no pleasure in the death of anyone, but wants all to repent and live.ⁱⁱ The Bible even goes so far as to say that the LORD *wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*ⁱⁱⁱ And God's desire is not just a mere wish. No, as Luther also saw in Scripture: *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*^{iv}

Yes, the Scriptures teach us the truth: our purpose, life and salvation do not depend on who we are or what we do. Rather, everything depends on God, and the love, grace and mercy the LORD has demonstrated in sending his Son into the world to save us – as the Scriptures say: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^v Our salvation, therefore, does not depend on us, but totally on Christ, as the Scriptures say: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*^{vi}

As Luther studied Scripture verses like these, the Light of God's Son began to dawn in his heart. It is not by our works that we are saved, but through faith in Christ and what he has done for us. He won the righteousness we need to stand before God. By means of his innocent death on the cross, he has paid for our sins in full. His resurrection is God's declaration that He accepted his Son's atoning sacrifice on our behalf. We are reconciled to God. We are forgiven. And how do we receive the benefits of this forgiveness? Through faith in Christ alone, as the Bible says: *in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*^{vii}

Luther wrote that, when this truth first hit home, he felt as if the gates of heaven were flung open in his heart. He was full of joy and peace. His life had been given true meaning and purpose. Through his diligent and prayerful meditation on the Scriptures the Holy Spirit led him to the truth, and the truth had set him free.

Part Two: The Scriptures are the key to being set free.

What the Holy Spirit did for Luther through the Scriptures he is willing to do for all. But herein lies the problem: most don't want to admit that they have a problem. They don't want to confess the sins from which they need to be set free. We see this truth played out right in front of Jesus in our sermon text, where we read:

"We are Abraham's descendants," they answered, "and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say, 'You will be set free'?"

The response the Jews gave Jesus reminds me of society's response to the Gospel today. "Problems? We don't have any spiritual problems," our world claims, "We are more enlightened and free now than we have ever been: no longer restricted by what religion once considered taboo. We can be whoever we want to be, following whatever desires our hearts are set on following . . . how can you even consider saying that we are spiritually enslaved? We are free to believe and do whatever we want. . . something God's pesky Ten commandments previously restricted us

from doing.”

Listen to how Jesus answers these objections, as he answered to the Jews objections about ever bring enslaved: ³⁴ *Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen (that is to say: “Truth, truth”), I tell you: Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin.”*

True freedom is not found in doing whatever selfish thing you want. Even though that might seem like freedom, it is actually enslavement to sin. This truth can be illustrated by our society’s claim that people should be free to “self-identify” to whatever gender they want. This might seem like freedom, but it is actually enslavement to a life of confusion as to who they truly are - ignorant of who God created them to be. And just as drugs make you feel good, all the while addicting you and making you more sick, so also sin enslaves a person – making them feel good at first, but filling them with secret regret when things start to fall apart around them. Worst of all, pursuing sin separates a person from the forgiveness, life and salvation God won for us. How? By preventing our repentance and thereby keeping us separate from Christ.

Jesus says: ³⁵ *But a slave does not remain in the family forever. A son does remain forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free.*

True freedom, then, can only be found in Christ – the only begotten Son of God - and the forgiveness he won through his cross. And the liberty Jesus offers us through faith in the Gospel is not only a freedom from the eternal consequences of sin; it is also freedom to repent and live for God as his dearly adopted children through faith – leading us to keep his commandments out of thanksgiving for what he has done for us. Yes, true freedom can only be found through faith in the Scriptures that point us to Christ, because only the Son can give us the forgiveness, life and salvation we so desperately need.

Therefore, let me ask you again: Do you want to be truly free from regret guilt and shame? Do you want to live at peace with your past and confident of your future – knowing that, regardless of what evil you may face, God will work in all things for your eternal good? This freedom certainly exists, ready to be found in the same place Luther found it. The Scriptures are the key, as Jesus himself promised: *“If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. ³² You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Let us, then ever be students of the Bible: looking for Christ on every page, and rejoicing in the freedom he won for us. Amen

ⁱ Matthew 5:48 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Cf. Ezekiel 18:32

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 2:4 CSB

^{iv} John 3:16 NIV84

^v 2 Corinthians 5:21-6:1 NIV84

^{vi} Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV84

^{vii} Romans 1:17 NIV84