

The Truth Will Set Us Free

By: Meagan McLaughlin

October 25, 2020. What does it really mean to be free? Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” His followers were confused, not realizing that they weren't yet free. Jesus’ reply to them is for us, too: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” In her sermon on this Reformation Sunday, Pastor Meagan delves into these readings.

Readings: [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#), [Psalm 46](#), [Romans 3:19-28](#), [John 8:31-36](#)

*** Transcript ***

So, as I was thinking about this — the readings that we have today and Reformation Sunday — I called to mind there was this time I was sitting in a restaurant and I was eating dinner (you know, this was back before COVID, when we could do those things) and I heard several thunks. And I turned around and I saw a bird flying around inside the restaurant, banging into windows here and there and everywhere in her frantic attempt to get outside again. She finally landed on the floor, exhausted, and I went over and I laid my jacket gently over her and I carried her through the door outside. I opened the jacket very cautiously, because I expected her to just burst out. But instead she clung for dear life, her tiny talons hooked into the lining of my jacket, afraid to let go and be free. And as I held her I wondered, how often do we do that? We struggle to be free from the things that confine us, and then cling to our cage when the door is finally opened. What does it really mean to be free anyway? And why are we, if we're really honest with ourselves, terrified of it?

Jesus’ followers are confused when Jesus promises that they will be set free, in that moment not realizing that they aren’t free yet. At times we do the same thing again, don’t we? We can be bound up, trapped in familiar ways of doing things, convinced that the way we see things is the only perspective. Without realizing it, we can get caught up in the violence and the “isms” of this world. And we can forget that we need God, and go off on our own, believing we can handle things on our own. And before we know it, we're trapped in our own illusion of self-sufficiency.

And often, we don’t even realize that we're stuck. Most of the time, we have the luxury of living in the illusion that we're in control of our lives, even if it is only through the false security of believing that we know what our future holds. Jesus in John promises freedom, and his followers protest, and we might well make the same claim. We live in a free country, slavery was abolished over 150 years ago! What do you mean by saying “You will be made free?”

Jesus’ reply to his followers is for us, too: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” We are all trapped in our own brokenness. And on this Reformation Sunday, it's appropriate to remember that, as Martin Luther taught, we are all both sinners and saints. All of us, at times, forget that we need God. We forget what our true relationship with God is.

We are free in one sense. But at a much deeper level, we are all slaves to our own brokenness. We all forget that, as we heard in Jeremiah today, God’s law — God’s word and God's promise — has been written on our hearts. The greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. God’s promise of love for all of us, God’s people, and our call to love God and our neighbor, has been coded into our very DNA. Kelly Brown Douglas, in her book *Stand Your Ground*, which a group of us are reading, says that God is by nature free, transcendent of all the brokenness of this world. And God’s work in us and in the world is about

freedom. Freedom to be who we are as children of God. And still, we, all of us, forget who we are.

Even Martin Luther was bound by sin — and I think he'd be the first one to admit that. Luther, whose leadership we celebrate today, did and said so many wonderful things. But he also said terrible things about Jewish people. And by doing that, he shared with us a heritage that contributes to hatred of our siblings in faith. Because of this heritage, we Christians can forget that the Jesus we worship lived and died as a faithful Jew, and so we continue to be bound.

We are all sinner and saint. Especially when we're feeling battered or exhausted by life's experiences, we can get trapped in fear, and ground our hope in our own efforts instead of trusting in God. We can go beyond reasonable steps to take care of ourselves, and feel separated from others, and from God. We can find ourselves tempted and even trapped into doing whatever we have to do to get the outcome that we believe we need. When I get into this mode of thinking, I end up stuck in a black and white story of my own making, terrified of losing control of the way it will end. We all have our narratives, the stories we create that end up binding us and separating us from life itself.

Much of the time, we have the luxury of thinking we are in control. But there are times, like now perhaps, where we are painfully aware that we are not. Times like now when the world can feel chaotic and terrifying, when as the psalmist says, the earth is changing, the mountains shaking, the waters roaring and foaming, and the mountains trembling with the tumult of violence, uprisings, a global pandemic, and political upheaval.

We can also be bound in the lies that tell us that we're not good enough. Voices that tell us that we're not worthy of love, and don't have anything to offer the world. And yet, at the same time, this lie tells us that we have to earn our place. We believe we'll have to make ourselves worthy of God's love, even as we know we'll never ever get there. Luther struggled with this, daily. I have as well, and I imagine that I'm not alone here. These lies, this denial of our own beloved-ness, are a powerful bond that enslaves us, keeps us from the freedom that God is promising.

We are all slaves to our own brokenness, but Jesus made his followers a promise — and makes us a promise today. "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And the truth that Jesus talks about, the truth that will free us, is precisely why we are so afraid of freedom. The truth, as Paul proclaims it in Romans today, is simply this: we have all sinned, and we all need God. Every one of us, without exception. We all need God.

And as we hear from the prophet Jeremiah, we are all beloved children of God, and we all have the capacity to know and love and trust God within us, written in our hearts. Coded in our very DNA. Without doing anything, we are God's beloved. We don't have to earn it. We just are.

What terrifies us about this truth is that when we embrace it, it takes us completely out of the driver's seat. We can no longer cling to an illusion of safety that is built on our own efforts or beliefs that we are in control. We are vulnerable, exposed for who we are, face-to-face with our own humanity. This, ironically, is the truth that leads us to freedom, the freedom to be exactly the people that God created us to be.

We are freed by this truth, because grounded in our own humanity, we can understand Martin Luther's claim that we are simultaneously sinner and saint. The very truth of our own weakness reveals our need for God, and our identity as God's beloved children. The promise of the covenant Jeremiah talks about is our promise. God's law has been written on our hearts, God is our God, and we are God's people. In

the core of who we are, God has written the law of love, justice, faithfulness, and forgiveness. This is the promise of our baptisms. And as our illusions, addictions, and sinfulness die in the light of this promise, we can see that we've been enslaved. And we can see that we are free.

God's truth empowers us to claim the promise of freedom not just for ourselves, but for all people, especially those who are marginalized, and for all of creation. The truth frees us to call for change where it's needed, even when it is chaotic and scary. The truth gave Martin Luther the freedom to challenge even the Pope, calling for the reform that was so desperately needed. He pounded nails and hung his beliefs and challenges on the door of Wittenberg Seminary, even though he had no idea how things would turn out, seeking his refuge in God.

Empowered by the Spirit, the truth can give us the freedom to follow Luther's lead, navigate the almost constant change and uncertainty that we are living in, and call for the transformation desperately needed today, in our world and in our church.

Like the bird with its talons hooked into my jacket lining, we tend to cling to what we feel sure of, certain that there is nothing to catch us if we let go. The chaos, as the psalmist sings it, does not go away, and times like these can be anxiety-producing and chaotic. God's promise to us is not that the chaos will end or that change will be easy, but that God will be with us, no matter what. This is the truth, and the truth will set us free. And you can trust in God, in faith that God will not leave you hanging.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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