

**And the truth will set you free!**

John 8:31–36

Today's gospel reading brings us an exhilarating message: And the truth will set you free! Freedom! Freedom at last!

There is one thing that might be common to many of us here today. It could be in your personal history but certainly in the history of your ancestors. That at last we found freedom in this new land Canada. After suffering either persecution or we were caught in the middle of battle. Many tell of lands, house, and even loved ones were stolen by the war, or by fascist and oppressive governments. But one day here in this land of Kanata, we were able to say, freedom, freedom at last! And we want to keep it that way. Free!

We remember too those who have given their lives to keep that freedom alive. Veterans from the world wars, or even those who we don't normally think of, but who played a role in the freedom of many, in centuries past or not so distant era. Take Harriet Tubman for example, who risking her own life to help enslaved people escape to freedom through the Underground Railroad in the 19th century, bringing so many slaves into the freedom of this land, Kanata!

But far greater than any historical any socio-political freedom, is the freedom that the God caused in the history of the Reformation. Through Luther in the sixteen century the Lord God once again revealed to us this Word, and the freedom it brings.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” The apostle Paul writes (Gal 5:1). The message of the Scriptures uncovered by the Reformation is that by faith in Christ, before God we are free, saved by God's grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, through faith alone. And that is the true freedom. In Jesus, we are free from the guilt of our sin, free from the oppression of the devil,

free from the power of death to destroy us, and free to live for Jesus and for others.

But how do we live in this freedom without letting it go to our head? Or without falling back into slavery? How will our faith in Christ's promise be sustained?

Jesus gives answers to those questions in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus tells his hearers this: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples" (v. 31). To abide means to remain, to sit down in, to rely on, to live in his teaching.

It is the Word of God what works faith in a person. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Rom 10:17), Scripture says. But faith not only originates in the Word; the Word of God is also what keeps that faith. God grants that faith and sets it in our hearts. But for faith to stay alive and growing strong, we must abide in the Word of God and the Word of God abide in us. Doing the contrary, meaning, to the longer we stay away from the Word, the weaker our faith becomes. And if faith is not nourished, it will eventually die.

The Word of God is the food of faith, the air faith breathes, and the fuel faith burns. Without the Word constantly nourishing and sustaining faith, it will die.

There is no other way. "Man shall not live by bread alone," Jesus says, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Math. 4:4). Scripture says, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, <sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Is 55:10–11). The Church of Christ is sustained and given life and freedom through the Word and through the Word alone.

That's why the Lutheran Church is the Church of the Bible. "Scripture alone!" is one of our Reformation watchwords. Yet, just as some of us have forgotten what it was like being under the oppression and target of evil

regimes, and live life as if this is what has been ever, so we forget to read our Bibles, don't we. I know, I'm one of those who forgets to read his Bible. But there is nothing so great that the devil appreciates than we forgetting to read the Bible. Why? Because the devil knows that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword..." as the Scripture says (Heb 4:12), and more, he works so hard to keep people from the Word. That's why he tries so hard to keep pastors from doing their best to bring the Word. That's why he works so hard to divide people from their pastors. Whatever it takes, the devil is constantly trying to get us away from the Word of God, because he knows that's where true freedom is. Without the Word of God, we are still slaves of sin.

Many theologians think and agree that the angel described in the reading from Revelations actually applies to Luther, after all because of his work of protest and reform, he made it possible for us to read the Bible, now in our own language and at our own leisure. And writing about the Gospel of John chapter 8, he says: The true disciples remain . . . [in] the Word of God, saying: "I am helpless. May God help me. It all rests in His hands. He promised and said: 'Just cling to the Word, and I will uphold you. When you find yourself in any extremity or distress, you will learn to continue in God's Word. This will liberate you and make you a true disciple.'" . . . Truth does not consist merely in hearing Christ... but also in believing in your heart and in experiencing with your heart that Christ wants to set you free. (LW 23:401)

"You will know the truth," Jesus said, "and the truth will set you free" (v 32). But the Jews respond, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" (v 33).

Never enslaved to anyone? Right then and there, they were slaves to the Roman Empire. And that wasn't the half of it. Because they didn't see their need for the Word of God, they were slaves of sin, a slavery far worse.

But they are not alone on that. We too have our own excuses, don't we. Have you ever heard it said, "I don't have to come to Bible class; I

learned it all years ago in confirmation”? This is one of the devil’s favorite tricks: to convince us we really don’t need to know all that much of the Word of God.

I have encountered people who have said “I’m Lutheran, and always be Lutheran,” so I asked them, “Well, we have a room for you at Faith.” And do you know what they say? I don’t have to come to church, I’m not that religious!

If we don’t read and study the Bible, know this, we are despising the Word of God. When we hear a preacher and, like an audience at any show, judge the sermon on how well it entertains us, instead of hungering and thirsting for a deeper understanding of the Word of God, we are despising that Word.

Here Jesus exposes our real problem. “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever” (vv 34–35). “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” That gets us all. No one is left out here. You’ve sinned? You’re a slave. Sin is your master.

Can you free yourself? No. Have you ever known anyone who stopped sinning? Anyone who claims he’s stopped sinning is already full of the sin of pride and self-worship and, ironically, is still a slave to sin.

That’s why Jesus invites us to confess our slavery to sin, so that his Word can bring his freedom. And with confession, Jesus also rouses in us a hunger for the Word. For in the Word, we come to know the truth, and knowing the truth in the Word is what sets us free. “The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (vv 35–36).

Free from sin, free from fear, free from death. Free from slavery! People of God, the Word was written down in the Scriptures, not to give us a list of dos and don’ts. The Scriptures are given to unfold for us the precious gifts God gives in Jesus, the Son of God in human flesh, crucified and raised from the dead for us. The Bible is all about Jesus and what the Father gives in him. It is his book, his words. This book preaches into our

hearts the truth that is Jesus, and it is this truth that kindles faith and keeps it alive.

Jesus speaks it on every page. He alone can speak it, for he alone has carried the sin of the world—even the sin of not listening to him and not wanting to hear what he has to say. He has carried it all. It's all forgiven.

To know that truth, then, is to be set free from slavery: freed from our callous disregard of the Word, freed to listen, to love, to treasure, and to keep the Word.

“You have been born again,” Peter says, “not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Pet 1:23–25). That Word is the truth that sets you free! That Word lasts forever. That Word makes you last forever.

This is why we have a special Reformation service. Not just to remember something that happened almost five hundred years ago, but so that God's Word can do what it does in our lives and hearts now.

So that we are reformed by the Word. So that our churches are pulled back into the Word of God. So that we hear again the Son say to us today—Go in peace, you are free! Free to live in Christ and for others. Free from sin and the power of death to destroy us. Free from the condemnation of the Law. Free to live joyfully as a son or daughter of God. Free to live in the house forever.

Freedom! In Christ there is the Word of life: “I have been crucified with Christ,” Paul says in Galatians. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Abide in the Word of Jesus, my friends. Only his Word brings freedom and life. Christ has broken all the powers that enslave us. “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (v 36).