

Sermon Notes for 10/25/15 (Pentecost 22, Reformation Observed)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: John 8:31-36

Theme: SET FREE BY THE SON TO LIVE ANEW!

Hymn: LBW 300 (O Christ, Our Hope)

Introduction: “No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day. Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner.” Did those lines shock you? Would it shock you even more to know that the quote came from the pen and the tongue of Martin Luther, father and reformer of the Church, whose reforming acts and words we celebrate this day? That shocking truth of the Gospel we continue to proclaim today to all who have known the bondage of sin.

How shocked the Jewish crowd was to whom Jesus spoke in the Gospel reading for today! Jesus indicated to them that they stood at the very pinnacle of crisis in their spiritual history. He promised that continuing in His Word would make them free. Their response rang out: “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” Of course, if you don’t recognize your slavery, an offer of freedom means nothing. As we approach the end of President Obama’s term of office, we will probably be hearing about presidential pardons that will be offered to certain criminals – or to those who may be under investigation for alleged criminal activity. But if you have not done anything that would be punishable under the law, you would certainly not be interested in a presidential pardon. What need would there be for that?

These Jewish leaders denied the history that was well known by every Israelite in that day. “Abraham’s descendants never slaves to anyone”? Israel as a nation had spent many years, probably centuries, in Egypt as slaves of the Pharaohs. During the Babylonian Exile, the whole nation (at least all its prominent people and leaders) had been dragged hundreds of miles away from the Promised Land and lived in captivity in Babylon for 70 years before being allowed to return by a beneficent king. Over the years, one powerhouse nation after another had kept Israel in subjection, if not in utter slavery, so that the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Romans, and other conquering nations could easily have challenged this statement.

It is pretty easy for people to deny the realities of history, isn’t it? How easily our nation came around to thinking about those horrendous events in Vietnam 40-50 years ago as the “Vietnam Conflict” instead of the “Vietnamese War.” When it seemed pretty obvious that the USA had not won whatever was happening over there, it was easier to think of it as a localized conflict, rather than a war, even though we lost nearly 60,000 soldiers (and suffered another 150,000 wounded in action) in that “conflict.”

On another front, how many groups (and even entire nations) have gone on record as denying the events of the Holocaust carried out by Nazis in World War II against the Jews and other marginalized groups within their population and beyond?! Or we could look at the number of individuals who do not believe that US astronauts ever set foot on the moon – but that the whole thing was orchestrated by US government officials filming in Arizona or some other remote place. Denial of history is not that rare.

What about us today? This congregation stands at a crossroads. From the height of its strength back 25-30 years ago, things have changed drastically. What a foolish thing it would be for this group to stand here and insist that things are just as peachy, just as positive, just as hopeful as they were back in the 80’s and 90’s when the sanctuary was filled to overflowing regularly! How foolish not to look realistically at just what the current situation is – to cover our eyes like Polyanna to reality – or to wish things were the way they once were! But our God has not changed! Indeed, our Lord, the author of truth and light, urges us to look seriously at those things which hold us hostage – and through repentance and trust in His promises to

find freedom, hope and life.

We could say the same thing, not just about groups and their history, but about each of us individually. The person who is addicted to alcohol or drugs or some other substance can fool himself or herself into thinking that they have never been in slavery to anyone or anything. Am I enslaved to my cell phone, when I can't be without it? Am I enslaved to my car? What if I had to exist without it? Am I enslaved to my health? What if it goes away? When we are confronted with what we have done wrong, our knee-jerk reaction tends to be self-defense. We try to justify our actions. Caught with his hand in the cookie jar, the child comes up with all sorts of creative reasons why he is in that position, denying that his hunger for a cookie (and his intention to disobey Mom & Dad) is the root cause of the behavior. Justifying ourselves puts us at odds with God, who insists that He is the only one who can justify us.

But when we face history – both our own personal and our corporate history – realistically, there is the possibility for new directions, new undertakings, new horizons to stretch out before us. The biblical word for such realistic vision is repentance. The depth of our sin moves us to repent. When we turn away from sin, God's Spirit can whisper in our ears the words that we most long to hear (recorded by Jeremiah): "I will be your God and you will be my people. I will forgive your iniquity and remember your sin no more."

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Such is the realistic vision of the apostle Paul as he takes a serious look at himself and at his brother and sister Jews and at the Gentile world as well. There is not one who does good, not one who seriously from beginning to end seeks after God. We all seek our own good, our own profit, our own security – and in so doing, we repeat Adam's error all over again. We want our own way, we want to call the shots, we want to be lords of our own lives. All have sinned and fallen short. It is one thing to holler that out in some sort of generalized condemnation. It is quite another to see that condemnation as it strikes my own heart and life: "I, yes I, have sinned and fallen short."

Not only are all sinners. Jesus says, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." This is the harsher truth. Our sin is not just a petty flaw in our character, something which others should just be willing to overlook, something that never overpowers the basic goodness that I represent at the heart. No, every one of the sins that I commit – whatever it may be, however heinous or however "slight" in my own eyes – is a symptom of the deeper, underlying infection of the heart. I am not a sinner because I have done a few wrong things. The wrong things that I have done are just the fruit of a dead and deadly condition that has afflicted me thoroughly. I need to acknowledge that I am a slave to sin. If I think that I have pretty much tamed sin in my life, if I imagine that my wrongdoings are just little slips of my basically sound and healthy and righteous self, I have missed Jesus' point totally.

Radio personality Paul Harvey tells the story of how an Eskimo stalks a wolf. The account is grisly, yet it offers fresh insight into the consuming, self-destructive nature of sin. "First, the Eskimo coats his knife blade with animal blood and allows it to freeze. Then he adds another layer of blood, and another, until the blade is completely concealed by frozen blood. Next, the hunter fixes his knife in the ground with the blade up. When a wolf follows his sensitive nose to the source of the scent and discovers the bait, he licks it, tasting the fresh frozen blood. He begins to lick faster, more and more vigorously, lapping the blade until the keen edge is bare. Feverishly now, harder and harder the wolf licks the blade in the arctic night. So great becomes his craving for blood that the wolf does not notice the razor-sharp sting of the naked blade on his own tongue, nor does he recognize the instant at which his insatiable thirst is being satisfied by his OWN warm blood. His carnivorous appetite just craves more--until the dawn finds him dead in the snow!" It is a fearful thing that people can be 'consumed by their own lusts.' Only God's grace keeps us from the wolf's fate, from being devoured by our own appetites.

God's Word of law condemns me as the heartless, wolfish, callous, unfeeling person which I have often

demonstrated myself to be through word and action. Of course, if that is the last word I hear, I am in big trouble, because (as Paul says it), “No human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.” When I feel myself condemned, I come to see reality, the awful reality of my rebellious spirit and heart. That leads me to despair and hopelessness.

But if I am willing to hear His word, announcing that my sin indicates that I am still a slave to sin, then I am also prepared – indeed hungering and thirsting – to hear His further word, His other word of hope and renewal, “The truth will make you free.” That is what we want isn’t it? Freedom! We want freedom to breathe, freedom to walk, freedom to speak, freedom to live. We want freedom to relate positively to those around us, freedom to search for truth, freedom to enjoy God’s good creation, freedom to leap and dance and sing for joy.

The Jewish leaders to whom Jesus spoke believed that the only person who was truly free was the one who labored in the study of the Torah. If freedom is what we want, then Jesus tells us clearly how that happens. He does not say, “Study Torah.” He says, “Continue in my word. Then you are my disciples.” Not just some deliberate study of the Old Testament or of Moses’ words, but continuance in the word of Jesus Himself brings freedom. The word of Jesus brings us hope and life in the midst of our fears and despair. That word of Jesus points us to His willing self-sacrifice and how that sacrifice sets us free. We are (Paul says in today’s Epistle) “now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.” The blood of Jesus is a life-giving sacrifice. Jesus went to the cross, carrying your sins. He went there bearing the weight of the sins and guilt of a whole world of rebellious sinners, including you and me.

God in the Old Testament made provision for Israel’s sins to be forgiven through several worship actions prescribed by the Law of Moses. A two-pronged action took place on each Day of Atonement. Two goats were brought to the temple. One of them became a blood offering. That one was killed and was burned on the altar. The other one was the scapegoat. The high priest confessed the sins of the entire nation over the head of the scapegoat, and then that goat was driven out, far out into the wilderness, never to be heard from again. Jesus fulfilled the images of both these goats. He bore in His body the sins of all of us, so that they would be buried in the depths of the ocean, never to be dragged out again to condemn us. And He died, shedding His innocent blood on our behalf so that we could be declared not guilty. He is both the scapegoat, the one who suffers in our place, and the sacrificial atonement goat, who dies for our benefit.

When we know Jesus as our Savior and Substitute, we begin to know what real freedom is all about. We no longer need to wallow in our self-righteousness, but we can rejoice in His gift of real righteousness, pledged to us because Jesus lived perfectly on our behalf. And we can begin to live as those who have real hope and anticipation of a future that springs with promise.

Next Saturday there is a critical event in the history of Jehovah congregation. Pastor Mark Noren will lead a reconciliation workshop. Some may say, “I don’t need reconciliation.” The thing is, there is hardly anyone who says that this church is not badly in need of some healing. We believe firmly that the needed healing will come only as the Spirit of God is at work bringing hope and healing. We need to be clinging to the word of Jesus, the word spoken by Jesus, the word enacted by Jesus, the word that IS Jesus. And that is a congregation-wide reality. So, even if you don’t feel that you are the one for whom this process has been set in motion, you are encouraged to be present anyway, to learn a bit more about how forgiveness and reconciliation can help to start a new day, a new era, a new mission path for this congregation as it moves forward in mission for Christ’s sake.

Conclusion: A pastor told about a member of his congregation who stopped by his office to say that he could no longer go to communion with such a church full of sinners! What a sad commentary! Sin is one

trait we all share. By His sacrifice of atonement, by His blood, Jesus sets us free from the curse, the burden, and the guilt that sin creates, so that we may live as children of the household of God. Continuing in His word means living by faith in His sacrifice for us. It means taking seriously His word of forgiveness that sets us free from the slavery of sin and death. And that sort of continuing in His word sets us free, free to serve joyfully, free to suffer patiently, free even to die peacefully. May your life bear clear and unmistakable witness to the grace of our Savior and our Lord, Jesus the Christ. AMEN!