

October 28, 2018 – John 8:31-36

A year ago, Martin Luther was everywhere. From Playmobil figures to PBS specials, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation had everybody talking about Martin Luther. Everybody wanted to know more about this man who posted 95 theses against the corruption of the church on the door of Wittenburg Cathedral. Everybody wanted to know more about this man who stood up to the pope himself and changed the world.

And our church body, the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, was right in the thick of it. Across the country, LCMS congregations had Bible studies and video presentations. We banded together to host worship services, concerts, and lectures. We were proud to celebrate our namesake.

Today, we celebrate the 501st anniversary of the Reformation and there's not quite so much attention on Luther anymore. 500 is a big, round, significant number. 501 is... well... rather ordinary.

And this contrast is a lesson for us. It's a lesson that Reformation Day is about a lot more than Martin Luther. Don't get me wrong. He was an important guy. The Reformation was a huge event in world history. It was an event worth remembering.

But Martin Luther isn't our father in the faith. He's our brother in the faith. And we are Lutherans not because we idolize Martin Luther as a man. Rather, we're Lutherans because we see in Scripture the same good news that he saw. We confess alongside of him the same truth of God's Word. We hear from Jesus that same Gospel message and it frees us just as it freed him.

And it's the power of God's Word to open our ears and free us that's really at the center of our Gospel lesson today. This passage is in the middle of a series of sermons that Jesus gives that actually starts way back at the beginning of John 7. He's gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Booths. It's one of major Old Testament festivals. It was actually just a few weeks ago.

So Jesus is there with a lot of other people. I mean, thousands of people for this celebration. And from the way John tells it, they're ALL arguing about Jesus. Some say he's a perfectly good teacher. Some say he's causing too much division. Some are firmly convinced that he is the Christ sent from God. And some are firmly convinced that he's a blasphemer who should be executed. Nobody can agree.

Finally, on the very last day of the weeklong festival, Jesus stands up and begins making some rather bold claims. That he can give them living water so that they never thirst again. That he is the light of the world and anyone who follows him will never walk in darkness. That he has come down from heaven to reveal his Father's will.

And the people are listening. Intently. Because they are thirsty for living water. They are lost in darkness. They are searching to know God's will. And John says that *“as he was saying these things, many believed in him.”* This resonated with them. This was what they wanted to hear.

But then he says something that doesn't go over nearly as well. He tells them, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* And they say, “What do you mean 'free'? Are you trying to say that we're slaves?” And Jesus replies, “Yeah, you are. Slaves to sin.”

And suddenly, they want to have nothing to do with him. In fact, the longer he talks about their slavery to sin, the more angry they become. Until by the end of this chapter, they're collecting stones to throw at him. They're ready to kill him.

All because he called them slaves to sin. Now, today, when we think about slavery, we think about racism and people who were unjustly trapped in slavery by the color of their skin. In Jesus' day, slavery wasn't based on race. It more a reflection of social status.

A slave was the lowest rung of society. They were generally in slavery for one of three reasons: they were an enemy who had been captured in war, they were a criminal who had been enslaved as punishment for their crimes, or they had become so poor that they had to be sold to pay off their debts. None of these were particularly admirable attributes.

Make no mistake about it. To call us slaves to sin is an insult. It's an accurate insult. But it's still an insult. In our sinfulness, we are enemies of God's kingdom, criminals to God's Law, and debtors to God's righteousness. We are no one. We have nothing.

And we are owned by our sinful nature. Sin is our master. Our sinful heart speaks and we listen. Our sinful world speaks and we listen. The lord of sin, Satan himself, speaks and we listen. That's all we can hear. That's all we can obey.

And we hate it. Because just like those Jews who couldn't stand what Jesus was saying, we all want to believe that we are free. That we can do whatever we want. That I can stop sinning whenever I want to. That the world doesn't actually have that much control over me. That Satan is just a Halloween costume made to frighten children.

We want to believe that we've never been slaves to anyone. But Jesus just shakes his head and says, "No, if you practice sin, you're a slave to sin. And one day, you're going to die. And your death is going to be proof that you didn't belong in God's house. Because you were only ever a slave."

Only a son remains in his father's house forever. Only the Son has eternal life. Only the Son can set you free. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

You see, the Reformation wasn't just about corruption in the church or the sale of indulgences or the power of the pope. Those were all issues. But they weren't THE issue.

THE issue, the one that truly overwhelmed Martin Luther, was that you'll never be free from sin if you can't hear the Son. We are slaves to what we hear. When we hear our hearts, we sin. When we hear the world, we sin. When we hear the devil, we sin.

But when we hear Christ, we are set free. *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* There is only one voice in all of creation that isn't enslaving us to sin. And that's the voice of Jesus. The voice of God's Word. The voice of the Gospel.

And what Luther realized was that the people of his day no longer heard that voice anymore. He himself no longer heard that voice anymore. He knew he was a slave to his sinfulness. If you've ever read about Martin Luther's deep despair and guilt that he perpetually felt, you'll know he was acutely aware of his sinfulness.

But, just like many of us, he kept looking for freedom from that sin in all the wrong places. In his own good works. In the empty promises of the pope. In saints and relics and self-denial.

But then he realized, he didn't need any of those things. He only needed God's Word. He only needed that good news that God himself had become flesh and died for the sins of the whole world. He only needed that good news that the power of sin, death, and the devil had been broken when the stone rolled away on Easter morning. He only needed that good news that he had been set free by a God who had made him his own child.

Martin Luther didn't just tell us that good news. He heard it. He heard it from God's Word. Just like we hear it from God's Word. And the lesson of the Reformation is not that Martin Luther created something new 501 years ago. No, the lesson of the Reformation is that he went back to something old, something 2000 years old. Something that we always need to go back to. Over and over again.

For we are truly Jesus' disciples only because we abide in his Word. We are truly Jesus' disciples only because we know the truth of our slavery to sin and the price he paid to make us sons. We are truly Jesus' disciples only because His truth has set us free. Amen.