

Oct. 31, 2021 Reformation Day

John 8:31-36

Following Jesus into Freedom

*John 8:31-36 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup> Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." <sup>33</sup> They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" <sup>34</sup> Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Like most pastors, I am always watching or listening for something I can use in a sermon. Sunday afternoon I was working in my garage and listening to a trivia type show on the radio. I learned on that show that the words "bored" and "boredom" didn't appear in any language until the late 1700s when it was coined in English. That means civilization existed for hundreds of centuries without ever needing a word to describe the state of boredom.

I immediately began to wonder why that was and was left to assume that up to that point, boredom was just not a reality for most people. Maybe they were too busy to be bored. Maybe they cherished the few times they got to do nothing except sit and think.

I caught a terrible cold this week that kept me from doing my usual activities. I was tested for COVID and the test came back negative. The coughing and sneezing and the lack of sleep they caused were miserable. But almost as miserable was the boredom that came with not being able to do what I wanted to be doing.

If you are a parent, you've no doubt heard this countless times, "I am so bored." You've probably said it yourself. So what do you do when you have nothing to do? Turn on the TV? Open the refrigerator? Complain a lot?

I had a lady in first church who I came to love dearly. Her husband had died a few months before I came there to be pastor. He had a severe stroke ten years before and she had spent those ten years caring for him. By the time I got there, she had a lot of time on her hands and was bored. She chose to use that time by coming to my office every Monday to

complain about something. I finally figured out she was bored. I knew we had a church member who had a video camera, so I asked her if I found someone to record our worship services, would she take the tape up to the nursing home and play it for our 4 or 5 members who lived there. She got excited about that and it became so popular that she had 30-40 nursing home residents coming to the showing and she wound up spending all day Mondays at the nursing home getting people into the room where they showed the video and then back. And she quit coming to my office every Monday to complain. A good use of free time and a great outlet for boredom.

What do you do about boredom?

Have we become slaves to activity and slaves to entertainment? Jesus says in our Gospel reading today:

*"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8:31-32)

I wonder if our slavery to activity and entertainment and has taken away our ability to sit and think—to really spend time reflecting on Jesus and His teaching—the truth that sets us free.

Ever since the dawn of history, we human beings have been on a quest that never quits—the search for the truth. Yet, even the very word truth defies explanation. Someone once remarked that philosophy seeks the truth, theology finds it, and religion possesses it. This may be so, but if it is, it's because acceptance of the real truth relies solely on faith. When the world's first married couple ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, it was in part because the serpent encouraged Eve to challenge her interpretation of truth. The serpent nudged Eve to question God's wisdom and her own faith, thus our first parents discovered that the search for absolute certainty will involve both the curiosity to discover new and sometimes difficult self-revelations and the willingness to risk the time and energy our search may require.

On this last Sunday of October, we really need to stop and think. For this is the Sunday when many Protestant churches celebrate the words and works of Martin Luther, whose search to know what was true and what was not true about the Christian faith hatched the Reformation movement which

had been bubbling just under the surface throughout Europe for at least a century before it actually took off. Scholars and theologians desperately sought to place Holy Scripture in the hands and the homes of all who wanted to read and study it. But the holy authorities stifled their efforts. They burned their manuscripts; they imprisoned and executed the translators.

Martin Luther cringed at the very idea of creating a movement or starting some new faith. He wanted the truth that would really set him free, and at the same time he desired to share it to create a healthier Christian population nurtured and educated in the Word of God from earliest childhood to old age. He realized that Scripture alone would guide believers in the Lord Jesus Christ confidently through all of life's joys and sorrows. All we will ever need is found in God's love and grace which lives in us as we are nourished by the Word. Luther found his greatest comfort throughout his tempestuous life and career as he read and reread the assurances of the Apostle Paul of salvation by faith through grace alone.

Science and technology and the wisdom gained from life itself has taught us many truths. Medical breakthroughs show us how to keep from having strokes and heart attack, how to protect ourselves from viruses, and how to prolong life. But the one that will set us free from all our fears of living and of dying has eluded most people. The absolute truth, which liberated Luther and which liberates all who believe it, is that Jesus Christ is Lord. This ultimate and awesome reality doesn't keep us from the fires and trials of our life journey; rather, it strengthens and carries us safely through and beyond them.

Martin Luther's discovery of grace defined as God's love and pardon freely bestowed upon an undeserving humanity reinforced his belief in the Scripture promises of Christ's presence even in the darkest hours of his loneliness and isolation. There is no doubt that he feared for his life. After all, the church authorities wanted not only to excommunicate him but to execute him. But he did not fear for his soul-his very being. He came to know and appreciate the freedom of trusting the Lord Jesus to be in and with him always.

This same truth frees us and motivates us for the chores and the trials of every day from now on. All we have to do is to believe that our Lord Jesus

lived perfectly and died innocently. Then we can find hope and nourishment from God's Word and from the visible presence of Christ made real to us in sacrament. When we come to know in our heart of hearts that Jesus will never abandon us, we may relax because we have discovered the certainty that matters most. The real meaning and impact of this Reformation Sunday is the freedom that believing in Christ gives. You and I are free to allow God to embrace us as we discover the inner peace that is part of our soul which is indeed our real self. Elizabeth Elliot observed that "Plato, three hundred years before Christ, predicted that if ever the truly good man were to appear, the man who would tell the truth, he would have his eyes gouged out and in the end be crucified." That risk was once taken and in its fullest measure. The Man appeared. The Man is Jesus! He told the world the truth about itself and even made the preposterous claim, "I am the Truth." As Plato foresaw, the Man was "crucified."

As long as this life lasts, you and I believe that the man whom Plato predicted would be crucified is Jesus. He really is the Truth that frees and protects us forever. So we need some time without activity and without entertainment to think deeply about Jesus and His teachings—that's the truth that sets us free. Amen.