

Festival of the Reformation, A&D 2008

John 8:31-36 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free?'" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 "We are Abraham's children and have never been enslaved to anyone." So protested the Jews who believed in Jesus. Not so fast. "Truly, truly," Jesus said to them, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Yes, but we are Americans. We are free by birth. We have statues and pledges and hymns attesting to our freedom. We have never been slaves to anyone, least of all to sin. Sin is not our captor, but we are its master. Though we may dabble in it for a time, we are certainly not controlled by it, you say.

2 Four hundred ninety-one years ago on this evening, a German monk nailed 95 propositions for debate on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The church door was the town marquee, the place for announcements and ideas. Luther hoped his Theses would spark a conversation between theologians over a pint of Wittenberg beer. The point of the Theses was that the Roman Church's practice of selling indulgences to pay for sins was sinful and detrimental to a Christian's faith. An indulgence was a piece of paper signed by the pope, that gave you or a living or dead relative for whom you purchased it some years of release from the imagined purgatory. Luther watched the pope and his cronies exploiting the people of Wittenberg with the idea that they could pay for their sins.

3 We are Lutheran, you say, and have never been enslaved to anyone. We have neither pope nor a hierarchical church. We are free from that damnable works righteousness and from the rigid demands of the Law. We are free from all those things that smack of papal heresy. We are no slaves to tradition. We are free from Rome's false theology and the pope's Pelagianism. But the selling of indulgences wasn't a false practice because it assumed sins could be paid for. The ones who bought indulgences at least understood that sins have a price. The problem was that indulgences underestimated the price of sin. No amount of money you could save would ever be enough to buy you out of your slavery to sin. So what's the difference between the heretical selling of indulgences and your false supposition that, having been forgiven once, you may return to your old, wicked ways? Do you dare suppose sins have no price and that they may be dabbled in freely without any payment on your part? Repent.

4 Sins are expensive. They hold you captive whether you realize it or not. The truth of what Jesus tells the Jews in the Gospel lesson stings just as sharply today. Sin enslaves you. And sin isn't a miserly master to be paid off with money toward an indulgence, your weekly offering, half-hearted good works, or even your pious pretensions that you're a "good person." Sin demands full payment for your life that it rightly owns. Freedom won't be cheaply bought.

5 Freedom will be bought "not with perishable things such as silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pe 1:19). No coin in papal coffers will ring loudly enough to release you from slavery to sin, death, and the devil. But the ransom was paid with the crimson gold from the veins of the crucified Savior. He poured out every last drop to pay for your release. His death on the cross crushed the power of death over you. The Son of God was free and knew no slavery, but He took on your slavery. He enslaved Himself to your flesh, "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity" became "true man, born of the Virgin Mary." He allowed Himself to be whipped and scourged as a slave, enslaved finally to the prison hewn of wood: the cross. There, he was shackled with nails and held in place by His great love for you. The same Jesus is your Lord, who has redeemed you, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.

6 So you are free. You are free from sin so that you may not offer yourself to it to enslave you again. The blood and water that flowed from the crucified Savior's side ran to the very font wherein you were given faith in this same Savior. The blood flowed into the chalice which He gives to drink for the forgiveness of your sins. The words from His mouth on the cross continue today from the Lord's pulpits and in His gift of Holy Absolution. And all that is expected of you is this invitation from the Lord: "Abide in my word."

7 That's what the Reformation was about, a struggle to abide in the Lord's word. Abiding is nothing. It's not going anywhere. It's what a dog does when told to stay: he stops moving, stops struggling, stops going away. While your natural sinful inclination is to go, to move, to depart from the Lord and His word, He sets you free to stay. The Reformation was a struggle to stay. So today may you do simply that: stay. Stop wandering, stop going away, stop departing from the Lord, stop returning to your former master sin. Just stay. Stay where your Lord keeps you steadfast: in His word.

8 That's true Christian freedom. You are free from the demands of God's law, free from the burden of having to be righteous enough to earn His favor, free from cheap indulgences. Your salvation was bought with the incomparable riches of the drops of blood of your Lord, more valuable than gold coins. He has thus set you free. Free not to leave, but free to stay. Free to stay in daily repentance that the Lord graciously gives. Free to stay here hearing His word, receiving His Absolution, remaining in His Baptismal grace, receiving His Body and Blood. You are free to stay.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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