

WASHINGTON COUNTY CONFERENCE  
Reformation Day Sunday  
October 31, 2010  
St John Lutheran Church, Hagerstown

Jeremiah 31 : 31 – 34  
Romans 3 : 19 – 28  
John 8 : 31 – 36

Some years ago, the pastor of my church decided to do what she called a “Youth Sunday.”

You know, get the young people to participate in worship,  
have them read the lessons,  
let them pick the hymns  
serve as ushers  
maybe even get the youth group to do the sermon and give the pastor a break from preaching.

I was the youth worker on staff then,  
and when I first brought up the pastor’s idea at the youth planning meeting, a loud groan is all I got.

This congregation had a lot of teenagers back then, still does.  
It’s an African American church in one of the country’s poorest neighborhood in Camden, New Jersey with all of the problems and challenges of the inner city.

But I must say  
once the kids got past their initial negative reaction,  
they really came through with flying colors and began to plan “their” worship service.

They selected great songs and hymns,  
they volunteered as ushers and readers and acolytes eagerly (although they’d never admitted to any eagerness on their part)  
and one young woman who was very gifted and aspired to become an artist even designed a special bulletin cover.

And when they were done, maybe the pastor got more than she had bargained for,

Because you see,  
the youth group decided that yes, they would preach the sermon  
... but they would do it as a rap

You know, that grating rhythmic singing (if you can call it that) that’s almost painful to my baby boomer ears.

But then, it's their sermon, right?

And doing it in a way that would be attractive to today's youth and reflect THEIR culture and THEIR music was the whole idea, right?

So they decided to write this rap on the lesson for that day which happened to be Galatians 5:1 where the Apostle Paul talks about how Christ has set us free and how we no longer should submit to the slavery of the law (not one of our texts today, but certainly related).

I don't remember much of that Youth Sunday, can't even tell you anymore what the pastor's reaction was, but the image that sticks in my mind after all these years is of the young people, huddling in the church basement and practicing their rap over and over again:

For freedom Christ has set us free  
so don't be a sucker for slavery  
it cannot be because we're free  
so don't be a sucker for slavery

Here they were,  
the great-great-great-great grandchildren of slaves  
putting into their words and their language and their music what Paul was trying to say about the freedom that Christ has brought us ....

the freedom that Jesus himself promises in this Gospel text from John today.

Here they were,  
African American teenagers in one of the worst inner city slums  
confronted with the very real slavery of violence and abuse and broken families every single day

Here they were,  
young people with all of their questions and all of their problems and all of their doubts  
proclaiming more powerfully than even the best preacher ever could how through Jesus Christ we are made free to change the world and turn it upside down.

Jesus tells his Jewish followers:

If you continue in my word,  
you will know the truth,  
and the truth will set you free.

I don't know about you, but my Lutheran ears always get pricked when I hear an "if ... then" proposition.

IF you continue in my word, THEN you will know the truth.

Lutherans don't believe in an "if ... then" God who sets pre-conditions to his grace, and the exact meaning is somewhat unclear in the original Greek text.

Now I won't bore you with a lot of Greek but this is a fascinating problem because it shows what a difference the translation of one little word can make in the interpretation of a Biblical text.

See, the Jews that are listening to Jesus are being described as those who were already among Jesus' disciples – "tous pepisteukotos" (for all you pastors here who had Greek in seminary, remember that term, there will be a test later ...)

Grammatically speaking, that's a perfect participle (for all you English teachers out there ..) which usually describes a past action that has continued effect in the present. Such a verb can be translated with the perfect ("they have believed") or with the present ("they believe").

So we would assume that these are Jews who have believed in the past and are now believing in Jesus .... So perhaps a better translation might be

Since you are believing in my word, you will know the truth.

Or:

Because you believe, you will know the truth.

Actually, come to think of it, given how these Jewish hearers react to Jesus' teaching, it might be even more accurate to say:

You will know the truth because you believe in me ... even though you still don't get it.

You see, the Jews immediately get their defenses up and challenge Jesus:

What do you mean, Jesus? We've never been slaves to anybody ... WE are descendants of Abraham

(they conveniently forget those centuries in slavery in Egypt, of course, and the Babylonian captivity, to boot).

Not unlike how an American might react when told that he will know the truth and that the truth will set him free:

Can't you just hear it:

"What do you mean, Jesus? We've never been slaves to anybody. We are Americans ... we live in the land of the free and the home of the brave."

But they misunderstand because Jesus, you see, is not talking about political slavery.

Our text today comes in the middle of a rather lengthy discourse when Jesus teaches, among other things, about how God is changing the religious assumptions of the Jews,

challenging their law-oriented religion, really,

and engaging in a spirited debate with those who would believe him and those who continue to oppose him.

Jesus isn't talking about political slavery,  
Jesus is talking about how we human beings are – as we say in our liturgy –  
“in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves” –

We are dominated by sin,  
we cannot help ourselves.

Luther once wrote,  
*“As long as we are here, we have to sin. This life is not a dwelling place of righteousness.”*

As hard as we might try (and make no mistake, God certainly wants us to try), as hard as we might try, we cannot out of our own strength and our own devices free ourselves from sin and live a God-pleasing life.

Luther understood this perfectly, and he exhorted the pastors of this new church he inadvertently started to not gloss over the reality of the human condition and the promise of the divine salvation, quote:

*“If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true not a fictitious grace. If grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly”*

(we like to quote that “sin boldly” part a lot, but we rarely say what comes next:)

*“Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly for he is victorious over sin, death and the world.”*

There it is ... the truth that Jesus is talking about.

There it is ... the truth that in Jesus Christ God reconciles all of humanity to God's self

There it is ... the truth that sets us free because God has acted and we no longer need worry about making ourselves right with God ... because Jesus has done it all ... for us ... on that lonely cross on Calvary.

We are free from having to earn our way into God's favor.

We are free from the terror of an angry and vengeful God.

(do you hear me, church??)

We are free from feeling unworthy and from never feeling “quite good enough” to ever deserve God’s grace and mercy.

We are free from fear and damnation

We are free from worry and condemnation

We are free from having to save ourselves and somehow climb up that ladder to God

And all of this freedom comes because God has given us the truth, has given us God’s only Son, has given us Jesus as a gift, wholly undeserved.

Has given us the truth that in Jesus Christ

God has made himself right with us.

The truth that in Jesus Christ

God has come down that ladder to dwell amongst us forever

(Can I get an Amen to that??)

The truth that in Jesus Christ

God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

So here is Martin Luther again:

“A Christian is a most perfectly free Lord of all, and subject to none.

A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

The Good Old Lutheran paradox:

In Jesus Christ we have the most amazing freedom

and in Jesus Christ we are bound in the most severe way.

See, this truth that Jesus brings, that Jesus IS

is so powerful and so liberating it not only sets us free from the need to fix ourselves,

it also sets us free to get out into God’s world and proclaim our faith boldly and with confidence.

It sets us free to stand up for peace and justice

sets us free to grow in faith

sets us free to show mercy and kindness even to those we don't like  
sets us free to love all of God's children as Christ has loved us.

It even sets us free to go out there and risk it all and make mistakes as we live out the discipleship Jesus expects of us.

It sets us free to be the Church in a changing world and overcome the fear that comes with the sentiment "but we've never done it this way before ..."

It sets us free ...

to truly be the church of the Reformation

which means to be the church of change because what is "reformation" if not a fancy word for change?

You see, Martin Luther didn't mean to start a new church.  
He didn't mean to split the Roman Catholic Church when he nailed those 95 theses up there on the church door in Wittenberg 493 years ago today.

He meant to change the church, to reform it, to bring it back to where Jesus had intended it to be.

And change it he did ....

In fact, we Lutherans are the original church of change and our battle cry is "iglesia semper reformanda" ... which means the church is always reforming.

Perhaps today we stand at the threshold of a new reformation,  
of another major change  
because the world has changed, and it is no longer the 1950s or 1960 when everyone went to church and our churches were growing like mad just because people came to us.

These days, our society has left the Age of Christendom, and we find ourselves in a whole new context where being church by necessity is very different.

The world has changed ... and so the church must change!

Which brings me back to those teenage rappers all these years ago.

I remember the scene so well because the rap they were practicing down there in the church basement spoke of hope and of new life and of freedom.

Perhaps only the descendants of a people enslaved a little more than a century and a half ago can truly understand a concept that most of us take for granted.

When those young people sang about freedom,  
They were not speaking merely about the absence of political oppression or the right to  
vote every two years.

To them, freedom meant safety in the streets,  
food in the house,  
no drugs on the corner,  
a job after high school  
because in their world, "slavery" is all that and more.

And it is only with an ally like Jesus that such freedom is possible.

And so Jesus' words ring across the centuries with such ... with such clarity ... with  
such power one is tempted to wonder whether somehow Jesus knew of this small band  
of young people  
huddled in a damp church basement  
with words on their lips that came straight from their heart:

For freedom Christ has set us free!  
Don't be a sucker for slavery!

And that, my brothers and sisters, is the Good News for you this afternoon, and to that,  
let the people of God say:  
Amen.