

Towson Presbyterian Church
Rev. Joel Strom
Reformation Sunday - October 29, 2017
Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 8:31-36
“The Pros and Cons of Being Free”

Today is a significant moment in the history of the Presbyterian Church, and in Protestant churches throughout the world, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther posting his *95 Theses* to the church door in Wittenburg Castle in 1517. I’ve gone back and forth over the last couple of weeks thinking about how I should offer a sermon today. My first idea for today was to briefly flesh out the Reformation for you, give you some of its history, and then realized a brief recap of something so vast and wide as the Reformation would be next to impossible, and potentially not that interesting, and not really a sermon. So I’ve decided to just offer a sermon, which I think the Reformers would appreciate.

In our Gospel lesson from John, Jesus is talking about freedom, and freedom was a key concern for many of the Reformers. He invites the group with whom he’s in conversation with to live in freedom, which is not the word we usually hear him use when he describes the Good News of the Gospel. The words that he uses, and we often use, are grace and forgiveness and salvation and new life. Today Jesus says the Good News of the Gospel, and life in relationship with him, is a life lived in freedom.

And as he offers them freedom, he implies that there is a need in their life that is not being met and they are in fact, *not free*. To offer someone freedom is to say that they do not really have freedom, which naturally, leads his conversation partners, a group of Jews, to feel offended.

Jesus says, *If you continue in my word you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* Which leads them to respond, *Jesus, we are descendants of Abraham; we are not slaves to anyone. Are you implying that we are not free?* Which is a fascinating answer from a group of Jewish people, whose history was filled with years of being enslaved to powerful and oppressive nations. There are the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and currently the Romans.

But Jesus then takes the conversation in a different direction, talking *not* about physical slavery, but a spiritual state of being enslaved to sin. He says the one who commits sin is a slave to sin, which means that sin then has control over them; it has its talons in them. It is their master. But then he says that if the Son of God makes you free, you can live a life of freedom.

I’ve mentioned this before on a Sunday morning that I struggle with the word “sin.” Not in the sense of denying it – it’s fairly easy to look out in the world and see people hurting themselves and one another, nor is it that difficult to peer into our own soul and find areas where we know that we are missing the mark and where there is room for growth or improvement. The reality of what the biblical tradition calls “sin” is quite obvious.

My struggle is with the baggage that accompanies the word “sin” today. I sometimes hear this belief when talking about sin - *that sin is something that makes God unhappy*. And this image of

God is formed in us of God off in the distance, unhappy with us, arms folded, looking away disapprovingly. And that can become a dominant image of how we see and relate to and understand God. For sure God does not want us to hurt ourselves or someone else, but if sin does make God unhappy, it is because God desires nothing more than our happiness and our healing from whatever sin has us in its grasp!

The 4 Gospels of the New Testament are filled with stories of Jesus healing people, either by physically touching them or declaring with his words that they are healed and been made well. Whatever once had control over them, or had its hooks in them, was no more. In the Gospel of Mark, that's basically all that happens in the first four chapters – healing after healing after healing.

And while it's perfectly fine to read those stories solely in a supernatural sense that showcases Jesus's miraculous powers, it's also helpful to read them from a human point of view, and hear them through the eyes of the one who is being healed. Because when we do that, we can see a God, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, who desires for us to be healed, to be free from whatever has us, to be free from whatever has control over us, from whatever is grasping us, and not letting us become who God is calling us to be. These stories describe a God who desires for us to be healed and to be free.

Using contemporary language, another way I've heard sin in the Bible described is through the word *addiction* - a disease that can be very destructive to us and to others. Addiction is something that has its talons in us, which is in control of us instead of vice versa. And when we use the word addiction, we usually think of the big ones – alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling – all the real big “sins.” But in actuality, we're all addicted in some way. We all have our actions or ways of being in the world and how we navigate relationships, which in some sense has control over us. Maybe addiction's another word, a contemporary word that we can use to describe what the Bible calls “sin.”

And so you might be thinking right now, “*Well Joel, I'm absolutely addicted to caffeine. What do you say about that?*” My response would be, “Me too!” If I don't have that cup of coffee by 10am, the headache starts to make its way in and will not leave until coffee has entered into my system, and large amounts of coffee I might add. And so yes, I am addicted to caffeine, my body is addicted to caffeine, but I don't think Jesus is talking about coffee here in our scripture reading. He's talking about something else. He's inviting us to name our needs, to name our hurts, to name our brokenness. Really, he's talking about naming our areas of imperfection.

And I can relate to the people that Jesus is talking to in our scripture reading and their defensiveness. I wonder, are we really that different? Because there are pros and cons to living in the freedom that Jesus describes here. The challenge of living into the freedom Jesus invites us into is coming to a place where we're honest, and we admit that we're not perfect and there is room for growth and improvement and asking for help and in our lives.

And that is not easy. That is hard to do. Jesus' offer to us of freedom is an acknowledgement that there are probably areas in our lives where we are not free. But while there are challenges in this, there is also an abundance of Good News. How we begin living into this freedom that Jesus

offers, the Good News of the Gospel – grace, forgiveness, salvation, new life and freedom – is to begin with the Good News that the Reformers, the architects of the Reformation, so passionately shouted from the rooftops...

That there is nothing to earn, there is nothing to achieve, and there is nothing to prove. We are children of God, and God loves us not despite our imperfection, but God loves us *in our imperfections*. And when we have the courage to name our imperfections and areas where we can grow, God always meets us right there, and loves us exactly as we are in that moment.

We are not perfect, that's for sure. But we don't have to be in order to be loved.

And so today we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and how we best celebrate it *is by living it*. Do we miss the mark? Do we have imperfections? Absolutely. But God loves us in our imperfections, and invites us to accept that we have been accepted. And that's the first step to this life of freedom that Jesus invites us into. That is the truth that can truly set you free.

Thanks be to God.