

Reformation Sunday
Memorial Lutheran Church, Toledo
October 28, 2018

Text: John 8:31-36
Theme: Free Indeed!

The young girl came back to her parents in tears, several hours after a bit of a temper tantrum had created no small amount of tension in the home. "I don't know why I keep doing that..." she sobbed. "I tell myself I'm not going to do that anymore. Then it's like the devil gets into me and I do it again." This young girl had the courage to recognize her harmful pattern of behavior, to name it and to acknowledge the apparent impossibility of changing the pattern

Jesus' disciples were not quite able to do that. "If you continue (abide) in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." The protest was immediate. "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free.'" Knowing that the Roman government was now calling the shots, the protest would seem to be a bit feeble. But they were sustained in their sense of freedom because they understood themselves as children of Abraham. Jesus punctures that understanding: "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." With what result? Jesus adds, "The slave does not have a permanent place in the household." One's place in the family of God is not guaranteed by one's lineage or the church to which one belongs. Rather the question is, what are the forces that mold and shape our lives? What are the things that bind us up or, to use the language of the text, that enslave us? What is it that keeps us from experiencing the freedom God wills for us.

We often are enslaved by financial matters. Within the broader culture, our worth is often measured by our wealth or lack of it. Some of us have the fantasy of believing that if only we can win the \$1.6 billion dollar mega lottery we will know freedom. A recent New York Times article questioned that fantasy as the writer observed, "...there is no shortage of anecdotes of lottery winners who end up broke, divorced or even suicidal." Some of us are enslaved by the sense that we have little value and act in ways that would affirm that. Others of us are so full of ourselves that it's hard to create space for others. For the past weeks we have used these words for our Confession: "We have not allowed your grace to set us free..." so we worry, we impose our wills on others, we get absorbed with guilt about one thing or another. We acknowledged "...we fear we are not good enough"-so we withdraw and minimize the gifts that God has given us. "We hold God's grace from others..." -"What's he doing in this church?"-a prominent member of the congregation once asked me when referring to a visitor in worship suspected of selling drugs. We confessed, "We turn the church inward, rather than moving it outward." A former assistant to the bishop recently recalled a church where he served as interim pastor. "All of their energy went to the preservation of their building," he observed. "The congregation has lost any sense of mission as it focused on its own self-preservation." Jesus' words ought to disturb us, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household."

God's desire is to restore us into the household. Jesus will continue, "...the son has a place there (in the household) forever." This is the Son who is God's word made flesh (see John 1). This is the son who will make a place in the household for a religious leader who is afraid to come to him except in the night, for a lonely foreign, suspect woman whom he meets at a well, for a hungry crowd that needs the bread of life, for a woman caught in the act of adultery, for all those who know their need for a place in the household. This Son will be lifted up on a cross, lifted out of a tomb because death could not hold him. It will be so because this Son seeks to draw all people into the household of God forever. In the words of the First Lesson, "For there

is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:19-28)

"If you continue in my word, then you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Our Thursday evening Bible Class has been focused on what it means to be "centered and grounded in Christ." To continue in Jesus' word is, quite literally, to abide in Christ. How does that happen in your life? That was the question we talked with which we wrestled during our staff devotions on Thursday and later with our class on Thursday evening. Responses included, "I abide in Christ by beginning my day with morning devotions and prayer, by journaling, by having conversations with Jesus and taking time to listen, by participating in study groups and Bible studies that provide opportunity to make connections between my faith and what's happening in my life, by talking about my problems with a Christian friend, by visual reminders-the Lenten tokens, scripture verses placed in my car or on an iPad, computer passwords that point me to Christ, worship-including hymns that move me, paying attention to the words of the liturgy, being able to confess my sins and hearing the promise of forgiveness, recalling my baptism in to Christ, hearing the word talked about in the children's message and sermon, sharing in the Lord's supper and knowing that every meal reminds me of Jesus the Bread of Life, sharing the peace of Christ with one another, by being a part of a congregation where we know one another, care for one another, and pray for each other. What might you add to the list?

"If the Son makes you free," Jesus says, "...you will be free indeed." The freedom that we have in Christ is the freedom that enables a bewildered young girl to come back to her parents because she knows that they love her and will forgive. It's the freedom that allows the parents to say, "Dear girl, you are deeply loved and forgiven. Know that the very stubbornness and determination that drives all of us crazy may be just the gift that God has given you that will enable you to be strong, bold, and courageous as you grow up." It's the freedom that allows all of us to confess the ways that we are still "captive to sin" knowing that in the very words we speak the Holy Spirit is at work reclaiming us. It is the freedom that makes it possible for us to not yield to despair over one thing or another because we have the promise of a God who in Christ Jesus will not abandon us and who holds us now and in eternity. Because we know a God who in Christ Jesus has given us a place in the household, we have the freedom to give of ourselves that others also might discover their place in the household of God. As we face difficult decisions, it is the freedom to pray, talk with those who are impacted, and then make a decision as we entrust it to the God who will redeem it if it is wrong and bless it if it is wise. It is the freedom to confess, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. We have a place in the household forever.