

**John 8:31-36**

What has happened to the Reformation? We still celebrate it once a year. We still sing “A Mighty Fortress” with gusto. And yet, a look around us suggests that the Reformation is dying, and that in some places it is already dead. In Wittenberg, Germany where the Reformation began, only one out of every ten people claims to be a Christian. And barely one in twenty ever attends church. In the countries around Germany—places like Austria, Denmark, and England, the situation is no better. Less than five percent of the population goes to church. In Sweden where the Lutheran church reigns supreme the numbers are just as pitiful. And in these same countries immorality, prostitution, and pornography are the business of the day.

What about here in America? Is the Reformation still going strong, or is it slowly dying? A recent poll here asked for the names of people who have done much to help others. The results had Jesus finishing well behind Martin Luther King, Oprah Winfrey, and Bill Clinton. Here in the U.S. it is considered bigotry to claim that Jesus is the only way to heaven. To pray with people of all faiths and beliefs is applauded, but to refuse to take part in such a union is “unloving.” Here you are respected if you champion the rights of women, but you are scum if you speak for the rights of the unborn child. In America, to defend the union between one man and one woman is being “prejudiced,” but to rally for the rights of homosexuals is “fair and open-minded.” Here in the U.S. it is rare for a Lutheran confirmand to continue going to church beyond their high school years.

And so again I ask: What is happening to the Reformation? It seems that we have turned the Reformation into a claim for individual freedom. Freedom to live for oneself. Freedom to forsake the Word of God and His Gospel. We hear how Martin Luther rejected the claims of the pope; how he refused to be bound by the church’s demands, and we translate that action as a license to sin. “No one...not the pastor, not the church, not the Word of God can tell me how to live my life! It’s my life, and I will live it freely as I see best!”

But if we think that Luther and the Reformation gave us the freedom to have such an attitude, then the Reformation, for us, is dead and buried. Luther rejected the demands and claims of the church only when they opposed the Word of God; only when they went against the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But nowhere does the Reformation give us the right to live for ourselves; to be free from everyone and everything.

What happens to a kite when you cut the string? Is it free? Is it free to go where it wants and live how it pleases? No. It will crash to the ground. The string may have control of the kite, but without that string there is no true freedom.

In our text Jesus says, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” He is not saying that your baptism has freed you to live a life of sin. Jesus did not free you from slavery to sin so that you can go right back to it. By His sufferings, death, and resurrection Jesus freed you from the power and curse of sin so that He may live within you and through you.

Many of you watched the Cardinals beat the Detroit Tigers to win the World Series in five games. And you may know that Jeff Weaver, who won game five for the Cardinals, some years ago used to play for Detroit. Now, which team was Weaver loyal to? He was traded from the Tigers and is now a Cardinal. Would St. Louis have put him on the mound to

pitch last Friday if his loyalties remained with Detroit? No. Weaver pitched and won the game for St. Louis. He could not play for both teams. He had to be loyal to one team only.

Jesus says it like this, “You cannot serve two masters.” And He wasn’t speaking of baseball players. He is speaking to us. Once we lived in sin. Sin was our master. But now you are baptized. You belong to Christ because He freed you from your sin. You are free to fight against sin and serve Jesus with your life, because He lives in you. You cannot live for both. Like with Jeff Weaver, you cannot be on Jesus’ “team” and yet allow sin to be your master.

And so why do you? Why do you daily give in to sinful desires? Why do you turn aside from the Word of God and do what your sinful flesh wants to do, knowing full well that it’s wrong? I know why, because I, too, struggle just as you do. We’re in this together, and not one of us is loyal to Christ as we should be. We all take the opportunity to use our Christian freedom to walk right back into slavery to sin.

I’ll be honest with you...you, dear baptized Christian, are free to live how you please Sunday mornings. Now, since Christ freed you from sin and hell, why would we want to despise preaching and His Word? Why would we want to refuse to come to the meal of His body and blood?

Dear Christian, you are free to say what you want with your mouth. Now, since Jesus suffered and died for you, why would we want to use our mouth to utter curse words? Why would we want to use our tongue to speak against our neighbor?

Dear Christian, you are free in Christ to use your money in the manner that you please. Now, since Christ has given you all the treasures of heaven in your baptism, why would we want to rob God by giving Him only a pittance of our income?

In other words, now that you are on Jesus’ “team,” why would you want to be loyal to sin anymore? Why give in to what is wrong when Jesus has already cut the string from our old sinful master so that He Himself now holds the string to our life?

Once Martin Luther discovered, by the grace of God, that eternal life could not be earned by how he lived, but was a free gift in Jesus Christ, he no longer desired to return to his old master. Christ had freed him from his prison. For years he was tortured believing that heaven was his only if he avoided what was wrong, and did what was right. The good news of Jesus Christ cut that string, and Luther had a new master now. He belonged to Jesus, not because of how he lived, but because Jesus lived and died for him.

That’s what the Reformation means for us. You are free from the curse of your sin. Your sin cannot condemn you because Jesus was already condemned in your place. He has freed you from the jaws of hell by suffering hell’s torment for you. And you don’t have to do anything to have these blessings. They belong to you in Christ Jesus. Baptized into Him they are yours. Even faith is not something you do—it is given you in Holy Baptism.

But these blessings can be lost. Remember what has happened in Wittenberg. Remember what has happened throughout Europe...so many who do not care at all about Jesus Christ and His Gospel. And what about us—when we live for ourselves and care little for the

Word of God and His House—what then does Christ really mean for us? May God have mercy on us and turn us away from the power of sin to Christ.

Jesus is your Master. He has set you free from the prison of your sinful desires. He frees you right now by His living Word from the power of sin in your life. You are free indeed because you have been washed in the blood of Christ. And do not fear—the manner in which you have used your mouth cannot change the fact that you belong to Jesus. What you have done with your Sunday mornings does not keep your Savior from loving you. Christ has freed you from your sin. You are forgiven for all of your wrongs. No, you have not been loyal to Christ...nor have I. Friend, God forgives you. Yes, you have robbed God...as have I. He has wiped your sins clean, and He will never rob you of the treasures of heaven which are yours in Christ Jesus.

It doesn't matter that the world rejects Jesus. You belong to Him and He belongs to you. Let them all forsake the Lord—we say with Joshua, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

No one was giving the St. Louis Cardinals a chance to win, were they? They were a team ready to fall apart. They barely made it to the playoffs. And now they are the champions. That's what it means for you who belong to Christ. He was beaten up, bruised, bloody, and weak. He was dying on a cross. But He won! He defeated sin, death, and hell for you.

And because you are in Christ, you are champions in Him. Even though you may not look like a champion. Even though your life may be falling apart...like the Cardinals in September. Even though you and I live sinful lives each day, you are champions because you are in Christ. He won the battle for you. He died and rose again to free you from your sins, and this freedom is yours.

Will the Cardinals act like losers now that they have won? No. They now act and live like champions. That is how you can live in Jesus Christ. You are free to live, not as people defeated by sin, but who you really are—those who, in Christ, have won the battle. Amen.