

Sermon - Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2025

“An Open Lock” (John 8:31-36)

In a few minutes, Richard Krueger will affirm the promises made on their behalf at their baptism. Over the last two years of confirmation instruction, you have engaged in a lot of conversation about God and learned more of who God is through our study of the Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, The Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion. If I were to ask any of you this morning – and anyone who has gone through confirmation – what the Lutheran bumper sticker is, hopefully, the answer would come back: *We are saved by grace through faith*. Confirmation gives us an opportunity to define grace countless times because grace is at the heart of who we are as Lutherans. And on this Reformation Sunday, we celebrate this free and amazing gift that comes to us through Christ our Lord.

It is ridiculous that people think they have to do something to earn salvation. They think they have to pick a lock – or extricate themselves – from sin and guilt, or that they have to defeat the lock at heaven's gate. The good news this morning is that the door is unlocked. The way is open; we are free. Jesus said, *If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free*.

Now, when Jesus first spoke these words, his hearers responded, *Free from what?* The Jews didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. *We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying 'you will be made free?'* Now, of course, that was a ridiculous thing for them to claim. Had they forgotten the 400 years Israel had spent in Egypt before God sent Moses to lead them out? Had they forgotten how their ancestors had been captives in Babylon? And weren't they now living under Roman oppression? But Jesus looked past their short-sightedness and addressed an even greater enslavement: *Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin*.

They were slaves, as Jesus pointed out, and so are you and I. That's why we begin services with confession: *We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed*. Yes, we have sinned and we are sinners. But, of course, no one likes to hear a word like that. We'd like to think that we are entirely free, or that if we do have a problem with sin, it is within our power to free ourselves.

Martin Luther was battling that very way of thinking when he nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenburg more than 500 years ago. The church of Luther's day had developed an elaborate means of extricating – or freeing – itself from sin. People could be forgiven, but it was in their hands. They had to earn their forgiveness. They could earn it through contrition, confession and penance, by purchasing indulgences, and through other good works.

But Luther came along and said, *You fools, the lock is already open. You're wasting your time. You are free by God's grace, so just walk through the door.* He displayed the bumper sticker everywhere: *We are saved by grace through faith.* Luther reclaimed for the Church what St. Paul had said 1,500 years earlier: *Since all 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...for we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law.*

Neither Luther nor Paul denied the problem we face. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Each of us is a sinner, curved in on ourselves, alienated from God, at war with our neighbor, and at odds with the world. Sin is the cell from which we need to be set free.

That's where we stand in our human condition – bound by sin and staring death in the face. but thank God there is more. Jesus died for each of us and, for his sake, our sins are forgiven. We have been made God's child in holy baptism. Our guilt has been removed and our sins washed away. We have a future with God forever. The cell door is unlocked and we're free to go.

But we must remember that faith isn't the key that unlocks the door. The door is unlocked because of what God has done for us through Jesus, the Christ. Faith, which is also a gift from God, simply recognizes that the lock is sprung and that the door is open for Jesus' sake. Faith allows us to take hold of Christ and follow him out of the cell and into the freedom of being the children of God.

Now, we must note that this freedom of which Jesus spoke is not a license to do whatever we want, but it is the freedom to be who we are: followers of Jesus, servants in the world, stewards of the gifts we've been given, proclaimers of the good news, peacemakers, believers.

The Holy Spirit is working in us to make us the people God desires us to be, but, at the same time, we must live with that old, sinful nature, that old Adam and Eve. And because we must live with that old nature – that completely incorrigible, irredeemable self that would lead us back to prison – we continue in Christ's word: hearing the gospel, reading the scriptures, waiting in prayer, meeting Christ at his holy supper. We continue in Christ's word so that the old self is put to death and the new self is raised up.

Admittedly, there will be struggles along the way between the old and the new, and that tension, that struggle will continue until Christ's work is complete and we're resurrected, standing together with God throughout eternity. Until then, we walk by faith, claiming the forgiveness, the freedom, that God grants through Christ.

Jesus has opened it for us and we are free to follow him out into a world of loving service. So if the son makes you free, you will be free indeed. **Amen.**