

John 8:31-36 (NRSV)

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is Reformation Sunday, the Sunday each year when we celebrate our roots in the reformation of the church. It has been 492 years since Martin Luther began the Reformation by nailing 95 theses, 95 points for debate on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. But that is so long ago that we might ask what difference all that makes for us today.

That reaction, "What difference does that make for us today?" is very like the reaction of Jesus' listeners in the Gospel lesson today. Jesus has told them, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," and they reply, "We are the descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone."

Oh, really? Never slaves to anyone? Does the phrase, "Let my people go," ring a familiar bell? Something about Egypt, and God hearing the cries of his people and stretching out a mighty hand to free them from Pharaoh and bring them into the promised land. The most significant event in the history of the people of God and Jesus'

hearers have simply forgotten it? Oh, that. That was so long ago, God. What have you been up to lately?

It's always a treat for us Americans to hear of a people who are less aware of history than we are, but maybe that's John's point in this Gospel reading. The people of God always need help remembering the graciousness of God, need help remembering that God continues to intervene in history and in our lives to guide and correct, to raise and restore his people. They needed it in Jesus' day. They needed it in 1517. And they need it today.

The readings today call out to the people of God in every age, reminding us of our need for God's grace and guidance. In the Old Testament reading, Jeremiah tells God's people in exile that the day is surely coming when he would make a new covenant with his people Judah and Israel, a covenant in which the law, rather than standing over and against God's people would live in their hearts. This was Luther's hope, that in grace God would forgive our sins and remember them no more.

You see, at depth, Luther had the heart of a pastor – he wanted his people to know, he wanted to know himself that God was not angry with him, at least not all the time. He wanted his people to know, he wanted to know himself that God could forgive us and so we could forgive ourselves. This was the heart of the Reformation. He knew that the church of the day was manipulating the people's guilt and fear and he knew this was wrong, that the church should not stand between God's grace and God's people.

He also knew that the people of God are forgetful. The thing that Jesus told his listeners in the Gospel lesson is deceptively simple – “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” This isn't a perfect translation. After all, Jesus is the word, the word made flesh, so an accurate translation would say that if you abide in the word,

that is, if you abide in Jesus, then you are true disciples. And the word for “truth” is literally, “not forgetting” – if you abide in me, you will not forget and not forgetting will make you free. But what shouldn’t we forget? For the Israelites, they should not forget that they *had* been slaves, once, and that God had freed them, and only by remembering that would they remember who and whose they were and how they had been freed. And remembering that would keep them free.

And so we have a paradox – what Jesus is telling the people of God is that when they forget that they were slaves and how they were freed, then they become slaves again. Only by remembering that *God* freed them can they be truly free. Because the truth was that the people of God in this Gospel lesson were enslaved again, this time by the Romans and by the Temple hierarchy. But they were not just slaves, they were also God’s people, claimed by God and God in Christ was calling them back, if only they would listen and remember.

What does this have to do with us and with Reformation Day? A couple of things. First, nearly 500 years ago, in Luther’s day, the people of God were enslaved again, just as they were enslaved in Jesus’ time – they had forgotten to whom they really belonged and by whom they were saved and in whom they needed to live. They had begun to believe that the church could save them. They were the people chosen and claimed by God, but the church was standing between them and God.

So Luther returned to the basics – to the scriptures, to faith, to Christ. Luther translated the Bible from Latin into German so that the people could read the Word of God for themselves. And Luther emphasized that we were saved by grace through faith, not through anything we did or could do, so we could have confidence in God even if we couldn’t have confidence in ourselves. And finally, he focused on Christ and the cross, God’s perfect strength through

weakness, God's victory through apparent defeat on the cross, so that we understood the price of our freedom and by whom we had been bought and for what purpose.

Luther was, by no means a perfect man – he was coarse and sometimes vulgar and completely a man of his times. But he had an insight that he never let go of – that God loves us, that Christ gave himself for us, and that we need never be slaves again, not to the powers of the world, not to the church as it had been bent to selfish ends, not to anyone, so long as we remembered to whom we really belong. We could be truly free so long as we remembered we had been slaves but we had been bought for a price.

But the people of God are forgetful. And that is why we celebrate Reformation Day, to remind ourselves that we have been slaves but that we can be free. We are slaves to our fears and to our guilt and our unwillingness to forgive or be forgiven. We are slaves to our addictions and to our needs and our wants. But we can be free, by remembering who saved us and how. Luther didn't save us, the church didn't and doesn't save us. We are saved by the grace and the love of God in Christ.

So, on this day we recall the Reformation and Luther's brave protest against the church of his day not simply to celebrate our history and our roots, but rather to remember that we once were slaves, and more than once. The people of God were slaves in the time of Jesus when they forgot they had been saved from slavery by a mighty God. We were slaves in the time of Luther, when we forgot we had been saved by Christ alone and faith alone. And we are slaves today when we forget how we were freed by the Holy Spirit blowing through the church, putting Scripture and faith and Christ's cross back at the center of our life together. The people of God are forgetful, but God is not. Thanks be to God. Amen.