

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 29, 2023

Relational Truth

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”¹ I preached on that verse for Hank Mallue's memorial service a few weeks ago, which is probably why it's been bouncing around in my brain for the last little while. That quote is a precursor to the popular adage from Spiderman: “With great power comes great responsibility.” But I'd like to offer a twist on Spiderman's version in light of our text today: “With great **freedom** comes great responsibility.”

In our short reading from John 8 today Jesus links continuing in his word (being a disciple) with both truth and freedom. Or, to use other language, walking the Way of Christ involves experiencing and knowing the truth that sets us free. Christ's audience is perturbed by this statement, responding by asking when they've been slaves. The irony in their response, of course, is that the history of the people of Israel involves multiple instances of their being made slaves of other nations.

Setting that irony aside, Jesus tries to teach these would-be followers a profound reality: “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”² This statement would seem to suggest that the way in which we try to live our lives indicates whether or not we are truly free. Every sinful act then is merely a manifestation of the chains that we wear. This begs the question, what is sin? What exactly is it that binds us so tightly?

Most churches today are not hearing this text from John 8. It is only in churches that commemorate the Reformation that we hear this short reading from John's gospel. Many other churches are hearing from Matthew 22 instead, specifically the interaction between Jesus and the lawyer about which is the greatest commandment.³ Long and short of that interaction is

¹ Luke 12:48b (NRSVUE)

² John 8:34b

³ Matthew 22:34-46

Jesus 's teaching that loving God and loving your neighbor are the main points of the law. This would suggest that sin basically boils down to being unloving towards God and/or your neighbor.

Any unloving action then is sin. And such actions indicate that we are bound to that unlove, slaves to it. I see this manifest most regularly in selfish actions. Most, though perhaps not all, sinful and unloving actions are ultimately selfish ones. When we place our desires and values and ideologies as of greater importance than God's values and desires, we neglect the truth. When we constantly pursue what we **want**, while so many do not have what they **need**, we neglect the truth. The truth that our freedom is grounded on God's love for us. And that with this freedom comes responsibility. Responsibility to God and responsibility to our neighbors.

Martin Luther understood this and articulated it well in his treatise "On the Freedom of a Christian." In that work Luther argues that Christians are completely free from sin and death because Jesus Christ has taken their sins upon himself and given them his righteousness. This freedom is a gift from God, and it cannot be earned by good works. Luther then goes on to explain that Christians are also servants of all. This is because they have been freed from sin and death in order to serve God and their neighbors. Luther writes, "A Christian is the most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."⁴

Our freedom is grounded in our relationship with God. Our freedom is expressed through our actions towards our neighbors. It is only the truly free person who is capable of loving and serving someone else. Anyone who is not free, is experiencing some element of coercion in their actions. Slavery to sin means being coerced by our own selfish desires, by our unlove towards others and creation and God. And that coercion leads us to harming others and creation and God.

The truth that grants us freedom is the truth that we are most free in the midst of our connections to God, creation, and one another. It's almost as if, and listen closely now because I know this is the first time you're hearing this from me, we were created for community. Almost as if we are most free when we are loving and serving our community.

The truth then is that our freedom is found in our responsibility to connections and community. Freedom requiring responsibility? That seems a bit paradoxical, doesn't it? Well good news, we're Lutheran! We love paradox:

⁴ Luther, Martin, and Tryntje Helfferich. *On the Freedom of a Christian: With Related Texts*. Hackett Publishing Company | 2013.

Saint and sinner? A priesthood of **all** believers? God's Kingdom has come already but not yet? And now we can add, we are free in our loving responsibility towards God and neighbor.

A few chapters from now in John's Gospel we will find Jesus telling this to the disciple: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."⁵ And what had Jesus just made known to the disciples that led to him calling the disciples friends rather than servants? "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."⁶

For Jesus, the great freedom found in God's salvific action for humanity and all of creation, is the expression of the truth of God's love. Living in that truth is how humanity can be free. How do we live in that truth? By loving God and loving our neighbor. By focusing on connection and community. By living as we were created to live, in the freedom found in Christ and in the responsibility we bear to one another.

There is simply no escaping the fact that we are all connected. That acknowledgement is the first step in seeing how our freedom is also bound up in our responsibility to one another. The Way of Christ involves laying down our lives for others. We can only lay down our lives when we are free to do so, not coerced into doing it. And the only time that we can do so freely is when we lay down our lives out of love.

With great **freedom** comes great responsibility. Another paradox to add to our long Lutheran list. And in our freedom-loving culture, this reality is an important one for followers of the Way to lift up. Freedom is not expressed in harming others or doing **anything** to get ahead or in our ability to commit any action. Those actions are merely slavery actions of selfish unlove. We know, for Christ taught clearly, that our freedom is in our love, in God's love. Amen.

⁵ John 15:15

⁶ John 15:12-13