

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Reformation Sunday 10/26/2025 Sermon on John 8: 31-36 by Rev. Harvey Nelson

For Luther, the texts for today are like the texts for the first Sunday after Easter, they are the exact same texts every year. So it gets hard to preach on them. Now the texts for today are good texts. The Jeremiah 23 text is not a typical Jeremiah text. Jeremiah spent much time condemning Judah for its sins and proclaiming that God's use of their enemy Babylon was to deal with their sins. But in today's text he talks about God's new covenant being written on their hearts. Psalm 46 speaks of God as being our refuge and strength. Luther used this Psalm to write "A Mighty Fortress is our God". It is a great proclamation of the goodness of God. The Romans 3 text comes from Paul, so it can be complicated but it proclaims God's forgiveness through Jesus being God's mercy seat for sinners, and so sinners are justified by grace through faith. The most problematic text is our gospel text from John 8.

This text is problematic because at first glance it's so sweet: "the truth will make you free." Yet as we dig into it, it gets complicated. The context matters. In John Jesus does much of his ministry in Galilee, but when he goes down south to Jerusalem for a religious festival he gets into trouble. That starts in chapter 2 when he goes down for Passover and over turns the money changers' tables by the temple. He goes another time and heals a lame man on the Sabbath and displeases the religious leaders. He knows they don't like him in Jerusalem, so in chapter 7 he is told not to go because they would stone him. At first he does not go for the Festival of Booths, but he decides to go in the middle of the Festival, and trouble comes. He told people that he came from his Father. Many rejected his news but some came to say, "That makes sense to me." They said that in chapter 8, verse 30, and our text picks up from there. We'll come back to that. After our text he continues to dispute with the Judeans, saying that Abraham is not their father and if he was, they would follow Jesus. He says that their father is the devil. They did not like that, nor would you or I if someone said that to us. They were angry, and asked if he was greater than Abraham. He had said before Abraham was "I am." With that they picked up stones to kill him but he hid from their sight. So our text occurs in

the midst of a hot discussion between Jesus and the Judeans. It is not sweet.

As our text starts, John has a change of verb tense. In verse 30 it says that "many believed in him." In verse 31 it says : "Judeans who had believed in him." In verse 30 they concluded that what Jesus said made sense, so they could accept it as true, it made sense to them. In verse 31 it indicates that they had believed in him. Jesus basically tells them that their belief was not enough. Their belief had to be more than simple agreement or saying, "That makes sense." Jesus starts with an "if" and then he uses an important word "Meno" which can be translated "remain, abide, dwell or continue". Meno has the sense of "let be in you, have it make a difference in your life, trust it, let your life and actions show that it makes a difference in how you live and what you do and believe." Then you will know the truth (God's truth, not just factual truth) and the truth will make you free. His hearers do not like that and say, "we are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves." Now that was an absurd and ridiculous response since they had been slaves in Egypt for centuries and even then they did not have to look far to see Roman soldiers occupying their country. Their response was neither literal nor historical. It was religious. They say themselves as God's special people so they were always under God and were free.

I remember a prisoner in a prison in Appleton, Minnesota who make a similar statement. Since they were special under God they wondered why they needed to be made free. Jesus had a remarkable comeback. He said they were not under God, they were in fact slaves to sin. Jesus said your life and actions indicate that you are not under God, but are in fact slaves to sin. And in fact, if they are under sin so they are not in the household of God. They can be in God's household if the Son of that household makes them free. Jesus has switched from saying the truth will make you free, to the Son will make you free. They don't agree so their argument continues to the end of the chapter. In that discussion Jesus says that your actions and life indicate who you are under. If you resort to hatred, violence and force you show that you are a slave of sin and the devil. They did not like that, but they kind of proved his point when they went to get stones to kill

him.

Jesus said, "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed". Martin Luther came to have a deep understanding of this promise. In 1520 he wrote a book titled "On the freedom of a Christian person" in which he talked about being made free by Christ. He loved paradoxes such as "Christians are at the same time saints and sinners". And in this work he said that a Christian is an everywhere free lord, subject to none and is also everywhere a slave. By that he meant that we are all lords, because we do not have to earn God's favor, we do not have to do works to please God and get into God's presence. We are free from saving ourselves by good works. God has already accepted us because God has suffered for us in Christ, so we're set free from all that striving. We are also freed from following the ways of the devil. We are set free from resorting to hatred, violence and force. We are in a different place. We're free to love God who is so gracious to us. We're also free to love others and to be slaves to loving others. We can love them truly because we are not using them to get something from God. We are freed to love the lowly, those who are in need, those who are oppressed, discriminated against, hated and hurt. We are freed to seek justice, to oppose systemic, social and personal evil, so that we can respond to our neighbor's needs without any need for reward. We love because God first loved us and others are in need.

Luther captured what Jesus was talking about in John 8. Because of God's grace in Christ we are free from being dominated by sin and evil. Because of God's grace in Christ we are freed to be in good relationship with God. Because of God's grace in Christ we are freed to love our near and far neighbors and to seek their present and eternal welfare. Because of God's grace in Christ we are freed to pursue personal, social and systemic justice for the oppressed, the rejected, the lowly, the poor and the hated. Because of God's grace in Christ we have wondrous good news to share. So in Christ we have been and are set free. So free ones, go and tell, go and seek justice, go and love. Amen.