

"The Road to Freedom"

Reformation Sunday
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

October 30, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34;
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

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

Toby hadn't slept a wink. He'd tossed and turned and struggled; it seemed whether he threw off the covers to cool down or snuggled them around him to keep warm, he just couldn't sleep. He kept looking at the clock and finally, finally it was 6 a.m. and he could get dressed. You see, Toby was 16, and that day he was to get his driver's license. Hmm. The day all parents fear. The day all teenagers live for. The road to freedom.

Today we celebrate freedom. It's a freedom given to us as a gift by God, through His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who in suffering and dying works the atonement for our brokenness and our sinfulness. And through His rising from the dead opens to us the possibility, the hope, the promise and provision of eternal life. So it's important for us to understand that as we celebrate this day, for that's the central theme.

It was enough to motivate Martin Luther on October 31, 1517, to nail a sheet of parchment on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg in Germany, what we call the 95 Theses. Martin's intent was to spark an intellectual debate (they didn't have CNN in those days). But much to Martin's surprise, what he was proposing be discussed, rapidly spread around Germany; the reformation was born and, as you might be want to say, "And that was history".

But this is a history that has a life of its own. When we say "reformation", we're not only talking about an event, but we're talking about a process; a process that has set the Christian community over the past five hundred years free. It's a process that put the scriptures in your hands - not as a doorstop or as additional height on the piano bench - but as the very word of God put in your hands for you to read and consider, to study and to understand. But it's also a process whereby the church is constantly reformed and reforming. Change should come as no surprise to any faithful disciple of Christ. If we have a living, risen Jesus, then surely we must have a living, active and lively church. A church that's free, a church that's becoming and on the way to become, and therein lies the catch. For how can we be truly free without being fully responsible for how we handle that freedom?

It was just a couple of days before Toby was to take that driver's test - the long awaited test, the gateway to his freedom - that he was returning with his family one evening from an event. It was nearly midnight when they turned onto the highway leading to their home, and as they came around a sharp curve, they were startled by flashing lights on the road ahead. The road was blocked by police vehicles and ambulances; there were red flares out on the road; the sound of voices was magnified by walkie-talkies and loud speakers on the fire truck; and there was action everywhere. They had arrived only minutes after a tragic and terrible wreck, and as Toby observed all the action, he felt ill. What if that accident was his neighbor, his classmate who had just gotten his license a few weeks ago? What if that was the man who lived on the other side of the street, who helped Toby when it came to working on the car?

They continued on their way home, but the next morning the news broke as to what exactly had happened on the highway. The two drivers were classmates of Toby's. They were both sixteen. They had both just received their driver's licenses. And they were both racing on the highway, to see who drove the hottest car. And as they rounded a curve, they met another car head on. The result was all three vehicles were extensively damaged. And two teenagers were dead.

Handled irresponsibly, without thought, freedom can become deadly. So too can the way we handle our priesthood of all believers. Of all denominations, Lutherans take the scripture most seriously, very seriously indeed. Ask any graduate from a seminary who has had to wrestle with New Testament Greek. Ask any student who has been foolish enough to enroll in Hebrew classes. Talk to all the students who struggle with Old Testament and New Testament theology. As they have listened to teachers, established in tradition, bringing them current understanding and opening their minds and hearts to new developments in the Christian faith. For Lutheran students in ministry, considerable time and effort is spent in such studies, and should produce itself in their art at teaching and preaching.

But they understand one thing, and one thing really important to them: just as the Ethiopian eunuch in the story in the Book of Acts, riding in a chariot reading the book of Isaiah makes the observation, how can he understand the book without an instructor and an interpreter to guide him? So too it is for us. While we may like to think the scriptures are open to us simply by picking them up, so much will be misunderstood if we don't understand the long history and tradition of how those scriptures have been interpreted. The results can be disastrous, as any visitor to the Holocaust Museum will discover, where in the first room of that museum, Lutheran understanding provides the bulwark for a Nazi regime.

Great danger, too, comes in seeing the church as finished, as having reached its full development; as an institution it must be preserved against all threats and all new ideas. Such a stand is deadly. Just as Christ is risen and living, so too our church is risen and living. Just as Christ continues to reveal new understandings of the spirit, so too the church needs to be open to new revelations and change. Whatever else the community of faith may be, it is not wedded to the status quo or the same old, same old. Or what is that deadly joke - "we've never done it that way before"?

For some people to be challenged in this way is a very discomfoting thing. What if we do something wrong? And here it is that Martin Luther provides us with another insight that puts us in good stead: sin boldly. Do something, even if you get it wrong. Now sinning boldly is not just going on because we happen to think it's the right thing to do. Sinning boldly is going forward - but prayerfully, carefully, with consideration and debate; ignoring whatever the media have to say to us; ignoring the positions of politicians and parties - but looking seriously at scripture and the tradition of the church to see where that leads. We are, after all, reformed and reforming, moving into an uncharted future, having very little idea of where changes and reforms will lead, but knowing one thing for sure: that the risen, living Lord Jesus Christ is ahead of us in history, awaiting us to come to him. Whatever else we might think about life in the world today, the future is in the hands of God, regardless of anything His people might do or not do. And the truth that liberates us to move boldly into that future, reformed and reforming, is the truth of God revealed in Christ Jesus Himself.

The Bible never speaks of freedom as "doing it our way". The Bible never suggests that freedom is "doing our own thing". Freedom comes in the knowledge of Christ who releases us from bondage to self and at the same time enables us to recognize Him as our new master. We follow Christ and in doing so are slaves of His to the ends of our lives. Freedom is found in walking in the footsteps of Christ, in living under the orders of Christ, carrying, as we often say, our cross.

Toby's enthusiasm for getting a driver's license paled somewhat after his experience of that night. He came to understand in a very painful and shocking way, that the freedom he wanted, the independence he was seeking, the personal privileges a driver's license would give him, was only the flip side of a very serious responsibility. The open road to freedom for Toby was also the narrow path of obligation.

May it be said of us that our words and deeds and action show that we walk faithfully on that narrow path.

Amen.

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