

Reformation Sunday FLC A
St. John 8:31-36
David B. Stacy

YOU SHALL BE FREE INDEED

There was a young woman who wanted very much to learn to play the piano. She had a good singing voice and loved the drama and variety of musical experiences, and truly wanted to learn to play the piano.

She found a teacher and took lessons and sat down to practice at the piano. But when she made a mistake, as we all do, her father would rush into the room and tell her loud and clear, that she had made a mistake. She tried again and again, but whenever she made a wrong note, her father pointed it out to her directly.

Much as she enjoyed the tunes she was playing and was thrilled at her slow progress, her father had a different formula. He believed that one learned to play by eliminating the errors. His formula dragged her down so that she failed to develop confidence and made even more mistakes. She became frustrated and ended up crying with her face in her hands!

To this day, whenever she tries to play the piano, years after her father has passed away, she lives in mortal fear that she will make a mistake and she will hear her father's voice reminding her that she had made a mistake! Her father had crippled her! He had wanted good things for her, but he had made a prisoner of her instead!

I

How very like St. Paul who told us that "the very thing I would I do not, and the very thing that I would not, that I do!" Making mistakes is a very human thing to do. How does one live in a world where every mistake is held against us? How are we freed from that slavery to mistakes, our human nature, and the human condition?

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 6: 19-20, Paul addresses this issue and writes: Do you not know that you are not your own? For you are bought with a price, and in 7:23 "You are bought with a price, be not the servants of men." In Galatians 3:13 he says "For freedom Christ has set us free." In Galatians 4:4,5 he says that God "sent his Son to redeem them that were under the law." In 5: 1 he says "For freedom did Christ set us free," and 5:13 "You were called for freedom!" The Greek word he uses is "eleutheria", and it had a specific meaning in Paul's day.

In the ancient world there were few ways that a slave could gain his freedom. One way was for the slave to save up whatever bits of money he could in after-hours work and take it to the pagan temple and entrust that money to the priest. Over many years, a slave might save up enough to buy his freedom. On that day, the slave and his master went to the temple and in the presence of the priest, the slave turned over the purchase price to the master. At that time, the slave became the property of God, and slave to no one. He was free!

This ritual was known to all in his day, so Paul used it to describe our purchase from slavery! Jesus Christ paid the price for our freedom with his ministry, life, suffering and death! The price for our freedom was paid, once for all, and we became children of God. We were free from the strictures and burdens of the Ritual Law and became free people. "God's Son has set us free!"

II

As Martin Luther struggled with God and his awareness of his sinfulness, his tendency to error, his humanity, he wondered if there was any way he could escape God's judgment. This passage, this insight that Jesus Christ has paid the price for our freedom already, seemed a message from heaven, a message directly for him. He felt that heaven itself had opened up to him.

So moved was Martin Luther that this experience brought him to change his name. He had been baptized and christened "Martin Luter" after his father's surname. But now Martin was moved to think that eleutheria, the Greek word for "freedom" now characterized his new life. He began to call himself "Martin Luther"! And we know him by that name to this day.

This new life that resulted had freed Martin from Slavery to the law and its impossible demands "to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect:!"

III

In our day, we give attention to another Reformer, who was given the same name: Martin Luther King Sr. and Martin Luther King Jr. Their ministry also had to do with freeing people from slavery and subservience to others. They brought new meaning to justice and freedom to the people formerly enslaved in America. Their watch word was "freedom" and spoke of the work of Jesus Christ in setting all men and women free from the injustice of the Laws that separated people by the color of their skin. This freedom brought economic justice, respect for human rights under the Constitution, and reflected the US Declaration of Independence that held that "All are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...that all men [and women] are created equal".

It is for this reason we name this Sunday Reformation Sunday. It is unique to us Lutherans and it marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the "reforming" of the Medieval Church and its injustices and abuses.

Today we focus more on what we have in common with the Roman Catholic Church than on our differences. It is to say that Jesus Christ came from God to redeem ALL people from sin, death and the power of the devil. And it is Martin Luther whose insight that in Jesus Christ all are made free. If Christ makes us free, we are free indeed.