

## **Reformation Sunday October 27 2019**

### **John 8:31-36**

Five hundred and two years ago this coming Thursday, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Thesis on the Cathedral door in Wittenberg, Germany and officially started what became the Protestant Reformation.

I suspect that, along with many of our fellow Americans, many of us sit here in this wonderful worship space in Ely, IA half a millennia and half a globe away from that time and place, and wonder...so what!?

A Pew Research Center study released this week showed a quarter of the US population describes themselves as “religiously unaffiliated” a rise of 10 points from just ten years ago. This rise is particularly seen in Millennials, those adults (23-38). More and more people look at the church and say...so what!?

Martin Luther spoke a truth to the people of his age. That what they had believed was good news had actually enslaved them. His recovery of the scriptures and the good news he found there freed him from his own enslavement to guilt and anger and allowed him to proclaim freedom. Some heard this call and responded. Others, well I suspect they had the same kind of response as the Jews in our Gospel today. Wait, what? What do you mean we're enslaved? I don't see any chains around us, any shackles on our wrists.

I wonder if this is part of the reason church gets such a big yawn today. That we just don't seem to think anything is wrong. “What do you mean enslaved?”

In an August 2017 survey, a third of those who are religiously unaffiliated said they don't believe sin exists. Americans 18-44 are almost twice as likely to believe that as those over age 45. A 2016 survey, found that a majority of Americans believed that, "saying you're a sinner is a way of admitting you are not perfect." It doesn't necessarily mean that you should be punished for your sin.

I wonder if the problem is that we have come to view sin as a shorthand way of saying, I'm not perfect. In this view, sin is not a mortal wound, but more like a blemish on our skin. Embarrassing, especially when it becomes visible, but nothing that will kill us. In that case, then I understand why the church is not relevant to many people. We talk about a problem that they don't see as a problem.

I've struggled all week, wondering if there is a better way to speak of our plight than "sin", especially when it is so popularly misunderstood.

I believe we can. Sin, at its core, expresses the reality of the broken relationship between us and God. The one that started when Adam and Eve stood in the Garden and reached past trust in God and God's goodness, mercy, and love for them, to grab the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, believing they could do the job better than God. In other words, our basic sin is idolatry. Worshipping something other than the creator of the Universe.

Author Tim Keller is right when he said, "We will either worship the uncreated God, or we will worship some created thing (an idol). There is no possibility of our worshipping nothing."

God understood this. So, the first commandment given to the Israelites. The very first thing required and the one upon which the human relationship with God and all the other commandments are built, is that they are to have no other gods before God. Martin Luther explains that this means we are to “fear, love, and trust” God alone. Our first loyalty, the object of our affection, the one we turn to for guidance in life is God. First.

But, this flaw of idolatry, of worshipping the created instead of the Creator keeps popping up. What’s the first thing the Israelites do when Moses spends too much time up the mountain, talking to God? They go to Aaron and beg him to show them the God who has brought them here. And Aaron, the first priest of the Israelites, builds them a golden calf, points to it, and says- here is your god! And they bow down and worship a dead idol.

We are in bondage to that sin, my friends, of bowing down to idols. And we cannot free ourselves. Because we deny it! What do you mean enslaved? I don’t see any chains! We cry.

But they are there.

The sneaky thing is that this sin of idolatry is not just about doing “bad” things. It can also be about making “good” things ultimate things. The sin of idolatry is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than God.

For us, this means instead of God we look to success, romance, family, popularity, beauty, athleticism, good grades, getting into the best school, having the most likes on Facebook, having physical power, having political power... we look to these to make us feel personally significant and secure, to guide our choices in life.

Idolatry means that we give those things the time, attention, and devotion that should be given to God. We fear, love, and trust these things before God. And this idolatry leads to being driven, addiction, anxiety, obsessiveness, envy, and resentment that only destroy us and those around us.

And the reality is that our idolatry is killing us, especially our children.

I saw a study last week, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, showing suicide was the second leading cause of death among young Americans age 15 to 24. That's a 56% increase in less than 20 years. For those 10-14 the rate has tripled in 10 years.

There are many and various reasons for this, but the despair and meaninglessness that often precedes these acts is often driven by reaction to these same gods we just talked about. And I would bet many of our children, parents, and teachers would tell you this.

I recently read an article by a high school student related to applying for college. In part it reads, "For as long as I can remember, it's all been building to this...getting into college. Get good grades, take challenging courses, be involved, develop leadership skills, volunteer. You know, be perfect, or at least well-rounded. All of this really has me wondering, shouldn't a 17-year-old have a few rough edges?" And there stands another sacrifice at the altar of the god of Education. Of Success.

Because these gods, these idols we worship, take, demand, but they do not ultimately give life. They promise it, but they don't give it.

A person cheats on their taxes, maybe, doesn't report that cash income. Why does he do that? Martin Luther's answer would be that the man only cheated because he was making money and possessions—and the status or comfort from having more of them—more important than God and God's favor. He was living by the law of the god of Money. Of Possessions.

We give these idols the love and attention that should go to God.

And we are enslaved to these idols. How many of you as parents worry about your children? You want them to be successful, to get a good education, to earn enough to live. How many of you feel like the law, the demands of the gods of Success, of the gods of Academic or Athletic excellence, are robbing you and your children of something, but you just can't stop doing it. Of driving them to practice after practice. Of pushing them to get better grades, to do one more service project because it will look good on a college application. Of chasing after that elusive goal of making sure that they Will Be Okay?

And even with this nagging thought that something isn't right here, you keep doing it? Why? Because you are afraid of what will happen. Of what they will miss. Of their life being ruined.

And there is your idol. The thing you fear, love and trust the most. And there is our sin. And I think all of us, in some way, know it. Deep down we know these things are killing us and we just don't know what to do.

Invariably, if you talk to addicts, you will hear that change only comes when they admit their addiction. When they give voice to the reality that they are in the grip of something that they cannot shake. "I'm an alcoholic."

If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sin. If we admit, "I worship idols". God, who is faithful to us, will free us from our bondage to these idols, to our sin, through his Son.

Jesus says, if you remain, if you live life in my Word. You will know the truth and the truth will make you free. This Word is first and foremost Jesus himself. The Word is scripture. The Word is the conversation of the faithful assembled. In this Word we know the truth.

That God is the only one who truly has power for life. Life fuller and more abundant than the life we try and live on our own, following our idols. That God is the one who loves us. Who, unlike these idols, wants nothing from us, who needs nothing from us, but who only desires what is best for us. We see in Jesus the truth that God will go to any length to come to us, to chase us down, even into our own darkness. And will die, so that we might be free.

Will the god of Success do that? Will the god of Popularity? Will the god of Money?

My fellow believers. Here is the good news.

In the waters of baptism, you have been freed from these idols that enslave you. Cling to that promise like a drowning man clings to a life preserver.

In the waters of baptism, you have been freed from these idols that enslave you. Cling to that promise even as the siren song of these idols calls out so appealingly to you.

This is what these eight youth will affirm today. This is what we affirm each time we come forward and dip our own fingers in the water of the font.

When we come and receive the body and blood of our Savior at the meal.

We affirm that we belong to God, creator of all things- lover of humankind, and that means we are free from all other claims.

Free from the call of the idols that surround us. Free from their demands and accusations of us. Free.

Now, after being enslaved for so long, being free takes some practice. So come again next week. Dip your fingers in the water, taste your freedom in bread and wine and I'll remind you again. You are free!

Those idols will try and call you back this week, to enslave you again. So come back and be reminded of the truth. You are free.

Freed by the love of God in Jesus Christ for you. Loved, for who you are right now. Not some "better" you but the you of October 27, 2019.

This is the truth Martin Luther declared in the Reformation. This is the truth we remember and celebrate today.

That in the love of God in Jesus Christ, we have been freed from all that binds us. So that we might go forth and live a life fuller and more abundant for the sake of the world.

Thanks be to God.