

Reformation 2023 John 8:31-36

Jesus said, *You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.* John stops Jesus at that profound revelation, but Gloria Steinem was not wrong when she added: *the truth will set you free, but first it will [tick] you off.* At least that was what happened to the indignant believers who were listening to Jesus' teaching. We might sympathize with their failure to appreciate his unsolicited advice; it's hard to welcome a solution to a problem we don't think we have. Still, the Israelites' reaction to Jesus shows a stunning capacity for self-delusion. *What do you mean we will be made free? We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone!*

Aside from the fact that Israel's own scriptures so often refer to God as the one who freed them from slavery, these descendants of Abraham who claim they had never been slaves seem to have forgotten that they *had* been captive, to Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—that they were *still* occupied by Rome as this conversation was taking place. It would have been more accurate for them to say, *We descendants of Abraham have been enslaved by just about everyone.* Yet, somehow, their self-concept tells them that the opposite is true.

If the people are so offended when they think Jesus is referring to their political reality, an objective fact of history that anyone could see, we can imagine their anger when Jesus speaks about their spirituality. *Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin...* If we think about how important *freedom* is in our American context, how proud we are to be a free nation, but also how reluctant we can be to admit that that freedom was a longer time coming to some of us than others, we can understand the believers' outrage, how Jesus' accusation of enslavement to sin shakes the very foundation of our identity. If we have resisted the conquering forces outside of ourselves, how can we admit to being held captive by what lives inside of us? What lengths will we go to to *not* see ourselves that way?

We read this gospel every year for Reformation, but I sort of wish it wasn't assigned to this specific day. The timing can set us up for some bad interpretation where, instead of relying on the grace of God, as Jesus teaches, we—like the believers here—try to claim other qualifications: What Jesus is *not* saying is that Judaism missed the boat and Christianity is what frees us. What Jesus also is *not* saying is that 16th century Roman Catholicism missed the mark and Protestant theology is what frees us. Nor is Jesus saying that religion in general is wrong

and that freedom comes from forgoing a particular tradition for a creed, confession, or assent to correct beliefs. If we say any of those things, then we are counting ourselves among those who are freed by truth and categorizing others as still captivated by sin; that would be convenient, because then this passage would speak no word of conviction to us, only congratulations for being right. Yet, we shouldn't be too quick to pat ourselves on the back.

John is careful to address Jesus' words to those who already had come to believe in him; he instructs them to *continue* in his word—listening to his words and living in relationship with him, The Word. If they continue in this way, he promises that *then* they will know the truth and the truth will make them free. They aren't done just because they had come to believe in Jesus; he calls them into an ongoing journey of life in faith.

When I went to save the draft of this sermon, I put it in the folder designated 2022-2023 Festivals, but that's not quite the right way to look at today. We *observe* Reformation, we don't *celebrate* it as if it is merely an historical and historic event, because the work of reformation is meant to be ongoing. Jesus' words here call us to the unfinished work of reforming ourselves and the communities and institutions of which we are a part. That's what happens when we continue in the Word of God—we see the distance between life as God intends it and how we're living, and we strive to shrink that gap. First we see the truth of what enslaves us, only then do we even realize that we need to be made free.

The ELCA named a recent campaign *Always Being Made New* in the spirit of growth that Jesus teaches here: we face the truth about ourselves and the world around us, and when we do that, we can see where we need God to work in us and through us for the sake of the world. It's not an easy and comfortable process; we don't like seeing our shortcomings or how far we have to go. But it's hard for us to walk forward with Jesus when we think we're already where he wants us to be. May we boldly welcome the truth that God shows us: truth about ourselves, about our church, about our world—even if that truth ticks us off. And as we see the way to more fully live out God's loving intentions—for ourselves and for our world—*then* let us celebrate Christ freeing us to go that way.