

“Freedom in Christ”

Peace to you from God our Maker and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

One of the most frustrating and comical aspects of growing up in a rural community is the gossip system that acts as the primary means of communication. My father always jokes that living in a small town is wonderful because when you suddenly forget something, there are at least 3 neighbors who know exactly what you are doing and why you are doing it. Of course, their perspective is typically jaded by assumptions and by rumors that run rampant throughout the community. Everyone seems to have an opinion about their neighbor, and a person's identity in these rural settings seems to be most heavily influenced by what others think, regardless of whether it is true or not. Each time that I return home for a visit I am reminded of the words of country singer Miranda Lambert who wrote: “everybody dies famous in a small town.” But it's a fame that isn't always warranted, wanted, or accurate. A fame that that limits our experiences of one another.

I can still remember the day that the Sherman's moved into my home community. It took less than a day for the stories to begin flying. I heard that they were a Japanese family who had 7 children so poorly behaved that our local school system forced them to be homeschooled. It wasn't until a year later that I actually met the Sherman's, and it was then I realized that they were in fact, a Caucasian family from Winnipeg who had no children under the age of 30. This encounter awoken my curiosity and cased be to begin questioning all sorts of gossip and rumors that I had been subjected to. It turned out that there was always more to every whisper, gossip, and story. There was always another side, there was always “the rest of story” and so in many instances, knowing “the rest of the story” was relieving for both myself and those around me. There was freedom in knowing and sharing “the rest of the story.”

On this Reformation Sunday, as we commemorate and remember the events of 1517, I cannot help but think of Martin Luther as being much like a truth seeker amidst the inaccuracies of his own time. Luther believed full heartedly that there was more to the Christian narrative than what he had been taught, and as he posted his ninety-five thesis on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, Luther was somewhat metaphorically coming on the scene to unveil and share “the rest of the story.” A narrative that he referred to as the story of the Gospel; the story of God's unwavering love that reaches beyond the edges of the earth. And for Luther, it isn't just a story, it's a true message, it's a promise of freedom, justification, and grace that are given in and through the gift of Jesus Christ. A message that is at the heart of today's gospel text.

In this eighth chapter of the gospel according to John, Jesus is addressing a multitude of people, teaching that he is the Light of the World (John 8:12), and proclaiming in verse 28 that “When

you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.” (John 8:28). As Christ speaks these words, John records that many begin to “believe in him” (John 8:30). It is within this context that today’s narrative picks up. It is within this context that Jesus speaks to an audience that at one point or another believed in him, and he says: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). As is often the case however, those listening to these words are confused. And they respond to Jesus, noting that they have never been slaves to anyone. “What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” they ask (John 8:32). A question that is perhaps easy to gloss over, but likewise might be equally significant to ask within our own contexts. What does it mean to be enslaved? What does it mean to be free? Answers to these questions will likely vary throughout our midst. What does it mean to be free?

Of course, the freedom that Jesus is referring to has little to do with the physical slavery that his audience is alluding to. Instead, Jesus who knows “the rest of the story” is offering a different type of freedom, a freedom that in Greek is referred to as *eleutheroó*. The interesting thing about this word *eleutheroó*, is that it is a verb, it’s an action word. The freedom that Christ promises isn’t just a one-time occurrence, it’s an on-going action of being set free or being exempt from liability. It’s an on-going promise that although the children of God sin, they are no longer subject to the liability of sin, they are free.

But, this freedom comes with what might seem to be some stipulations. Jesus says “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples: and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). For the first portion of his life, Luther may have interpreted these stipulations as God demanding that he need to work for his own freedom; a task that he quickly realized was impossible to achieve. Luther struggled with this notion of God and describes his situation by noting that: “I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.” – (quote taken from: Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Chapter 3).

A trusted historian of Luther’s life, Martin Marty, notes that Luther pondered night and day the significance of righteousness, thinking continually on the notion that “the just shall live by faith (Romans 1:17)” (Martin Marty, *Martin Luther: A Life*, Chapter 1). In his pondering, Luther discovered “the rest of the story.” He discovered that in addition to what God demands of God’s people, God through Christ, likewise offers justification by grace, through faith (Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration, Article III: Righteousness). Through God’s Word, Luther discovered that being justified, being made right with God, cannot come through human effort, but is instead a free gift from God rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Luther discovered that the Gospel message of Jesus Christ is in fact “the rest of the story.”

And that same Gospel message of God’s unwavering love, the hope and resurrection that are promised in and through the gift of Christ Jesus, are likewise at the heart of today’s gospel

narrative. Jesus isn't providing another standard to adhere to for the purpose of achieving freedom, instead, he is offering a means for all to participate in the love, truth, and freedom that come from God alone. Christ is offering a promise amidst a narrative of slavery to sin, a promise that in and through the gift of his presence all might come to find freedom in God, freedom of the soul (Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520). It's a promise that all are welcome to be Christ's disciples – a promise that there is room at the cross for all.

Luther found liberating hope in the promise of the Gospel of Christ, a hope that shaped the Protestant Reformation and continues to shape our Lutheran theology. A hope that perhaps also coincides with a challenge – a challenge to live, share, and proclaim the freedom that is found in Christ alone. A challenge to participate in the liberating freeing of our fellow human beings. A challenge to stand against the injustice and inequality faced by many Indigenous Peoples within Canada. A challenge to make room in our country for those who seek refuge and freedom. A challenge to live as Disciples of Christ who are free to serve others in love; to both live in and live out the hope of the Gospel of Christ.

In rural community gossip we don't always get to hear the "rest of the story," but because of Luther's work and dedication in making the Word of God accessible for all people, I know with sure and certain hope that slavery to sin is not the end of the human narrative. For in Christ's death and resurrection, God offers the hope of life eternal, hope amidst life here and now, and the promise of freedom and truth.

Freedom from sin and life eternal with Christ our Savior and Lord, the Gospel message of a gift freely given that none by their own effort can ever achieve, is indeed: "the rest of the story."

Amen