

October 25, 2026
John 8:31-36

Reformation Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Healing Freedom”

“So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

I was recently shopping for Band-Aids at Shoppers Drug Mart when I noticed the wide variety of antiseptics available to customers. In addition to hydrogen peroxide, a person can also purchase brands such as Polysporin, Neosporin, Bactine, Elastoplast, and Dettol. One brand that I was happy to see was not available was Mercurochrome, which was involved in some of my least favourite childhood memories. Mercurochrome was a topical antiseptic used to treat minor cuts and scrapes, of which I got more than my fair share as a child. When it was applied on a wound, it would leave a distinctive red stain which lasted even through several washings. While it was a popular product for many years, sales of Mercurochrome and related products was suspended in 1998 due to the potential for mercury poisoning (the “mercuro” in the product’s name). For me, I was happy that it was no longer being sold so that children in the present and the future would not have to endure the stinging pain of this product, or the fear that even the sight of that tiny red bottle induced in children of my generation.

Even with the potential of the sting of Mercurochrome no longer a factor, there are times when we have to treat the wounds that we experience. When I experience a cut or scrape, I usually reach for the hydrogen peroxide or Neosporin so the wound does not become infected. More serious wounds require treatment from wound care specialists who have expertise in providing comprehensive wound management to facilitate timely healing and improved quality of life. But no matter how serious the wound may be or the importance of proper treatment, we are often reluctant to let someone treat our wounds because even addressing wound care can be painful both in the present moment and in the memories that arise of how we received this wound. This can be true not only of physical wounds but emotional or psychological wounds whose scars are not visible but are still very real. Going through the process of healing can be difficult because of the pain that we experience from even someone with the best intentions for our healing and wholeness.

On this Reformation Sunday, we celebrate our Lutheran history and heritage as we remember the events of October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Posting such

a document on the door of the church was a common practice in this university community; the door functioned as a community bulletin board, and people would post documents inviting scholars to discussions on various topics. Luther's intention in posting his theses was to engage in a discussion on the *Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, the Church's practice of making the wealth of goodness of the saints available to those who sought to save themselves or their loved ones from the tortures of purgatory. Luther was simply interested in a discussion on this practice which deeply disturbed him, but a series of events (including his writings being made available through the recently invented printing press) sparked what we know as the Lutheran Reformation and the origins of the Lutheran Church. We gather in worship to give thanks for the Reformers and our ancestors in faith as we celebrate the good news at the heart of the Gospel, that "*a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*" (Romans 3:28). We celebrate the blessings of God that are available to us through God's Holy Word in languages all people can understand so that we might share the blessings of those on the first day of Pentecost who rejoiced because "*in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.*" (Acts 2:11). We rejoice in the heritage of our church that is founded on the pillars of "*Grace Alone, Faith Alone, the Word Alone,*" and a church which is *semper reformanda*, always seeking to reform itself so that it might continue to share the good news of God in Jesus Christ in this time and place.

- "The holy, Christian Church is outwardly known by the holy possession of the Holy Cross. It must endure all hardship and persecution, all kinds of temptation and evil (as the Lord's Prayer says) from devil, world, and flesh; it must be inwardly sad, timid, terrified; outwardly poor, despised, sick, weak; thus, it becomes like its head, Christ. The reason must be only this, that it holds fast to Christ and God's Word and thus suffers for Christ's sake..." – Martin Luther.

The Gospel lesson for Reformation Sunday is from the Gospel of John, in which Jesus speaks to a group identified as "*the Jews who had believed in him*" (John 8:31), people who had come to believe that he was "*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus' teaching to these fledgling believers contains an "if" clause followed by three apodotes that speak of the resulting promises he offers: "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*" (8:31b-32). The condition is expressed with two terms that are distinctive in John's writings: *meno* ("continue in, abide") and *logos* ("word"). *Meno* denotes a permanent relationship between Jesus' listeners and his word ("*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.*"

– 15:9). True disciples faithfully receive Jesus’ word as the “*words of eternal life*” (6:68), embrace it, and allow it to transform their lives:

- “I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young people, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” – 1 John 2:14.

The three promises received by those who abide in the Word that is present in Jesus Christ are each built upon the blessing of “truth” (*Aletheia*) and are inextricably intertwined. The liberating power of the truth is unknowable apart from being Jesus’ disciple, which in turn depends on one’s relationship to Jesus’ word. The truth and freedom that Jesus offers are not abstract principles, but like light and life are bound to the Word. The truth is the presence of God in Jesus.

- “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” – 1:4-5.
- “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” – 8:12.
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” – 14:6.

The introduction of “freedom” (*eleuthero*) suggests that those who receive the truth revealed by Jesus and let it take root and mature in them will be set free, which refers back to the exodus tradition in which liberation from the bondage of slavery comes through the truth of God in Jesus. “*In order to be truly free, a person must first know what is true.*” (Francis Martin and William Wright).

We would expect that this invitation to abide in the Word that is present in Jesus Christ and the resulting freedom that comes from knowing the truth through him would evoke praise and thanksgiving from his fledgling followers; but instead, he meets with misunderstanding and resistance: “*We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?*” (8:33). As they had previously misunderstood Scriptures about prophets from Galilee (“*Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.*” – 7:52), they now misunderstand their own identity as descendants of Abraham, Jesus himself, and the freedom he offers to those who receive him in faith. There are many ways to interpret this response; it may be a statement of their belief that their descent from Abraham already guarantees their spiritual freedom, even though John the Baptist had warned that

they should not “*presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*” (Matthew 3:9). Their response may also reflect the hyperbole of their denial that highlights the poignant irony of their words; Israel’s history is characterized by periods of slavery and occupation, and their current circumstances under Roman occupation is yet one more situation of enslavement. “*In their desire to distance themselves from Jesus, they have already begun the process of distancing themselves from their own history.*” (Gail O’Day).

But if those who are receiving Jesus’ teaching were devout (or even less-than-devout) Jews, they would have known that saying that “*we have never been slaves to anyone*” is simply not true. One of the most important festivals on the Jewish calendar to this day is the Passover, the annual celebration of God’s liberating God’s people after centuries of slavery in Egypt. Remembering God’s act of liberation from bondage is a central teaching of the Torah; the Lord commands Moses on the first day of Passover to teach the people that “*this day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance*” (Exodus 12:14). After Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and to Mount Sinai to receive the Law, the LORD prefaces the commandments by proclaiming that “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me*” (Exodus 20:2-3). On the day we observe as Maundy Thursday, the disciples ask Jesus, “*where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?*” (Matthew 26:17); it is at the Seder table that Jesus takes the bread and wine and institutes the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which we remember every time we gather at the Lord’s Table and hear that it was “*on the night in which he was betrayed [that] our Lord Jesus took bread ...*” (1 Corinthians 11:23). It is unlikely that the Jews who objected to Jesus’ teaching would have forgotten their history of enslavement and occupation.

What might be the reason for the reaction of Jesus’ audience is that our Lord is engaged in conversation with a people who do remember their past, but bear deep, open, and invisible wounds from the injuries this past has inflicted on them. Jesus’ desire to offer freedom that will heal those wounds may cause the people he seeks to help to pull away and hide their wounds, because treating a wound can be painful both physically and spiritually.

- “To these sons and daughters of Abraham, Jesus’ use of the word ‘freedom’ implies captivity, and captivity is their invisible wound ... Every time they walk past a Roman soldier, every time they hold a coin bearing the image of

Caesar, every time they negotiate their lives inside an occupied land, the wound throbs and the pain intensifies.” – Zina Jacque.

It is not that the Jews who have heard Jesus’ invitation to the truth that will make them free have forgotten their past; they bear the wounds of their painful memories that catapults them back in time, and they cannot bear to feel that pain or stir up those wounds again. It is in their pain and woundedness that they insist that “*we are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.*”

Jesus does not chastise his listeners for their forgetfulness about their past enslavement or denying the validity of his teachings, quite possibly being aware of the wounds they are enduring. Instead, he addresses the two prongs of their protest and misunderstanding: freedom and their descent from Abraham. The solemn formula “*very truly, I tell you*” (8:34) marks the introduction of a new teaching: freedom is a gift that one cannot lay claim to by virtue of one heritage. One’s identity as a slave or free person is determined by what one does, not by who one claims to be; for “*everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin*” (8:34b). At the heart of sinful actions is the willful rejection of God, and it is this rejection that separates a person from God. The resulting state of separation, that of being a “slave to sin,” is characterized as slavery because people are powerless to free themselves from it and reconcile themselves to God.

- “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” – 3:19-21.

A short parable illustrates the relationship between status, inheritance, and freedom: “*The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever.*” 8:35). A slave is unable to free themselves from their enslavement, but a child is able to make another feel truly free on account of their authority within the household. The use of “forever” links the promise of freedom with other gifts Jesus promises (“*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*” – 6:35). As the Son of God, Jesus did not come to bring political liberation from the Romans, but freedom in the most profound sense: freedom from sin, which alienates us from God. True freedom follows upon receiving the truth that Jesus reveals: “*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed*” (8:36). As the Son who is “*eternally begotten of the Father,*

God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God” (Nicene Creed), Jesus is able to free all people enslaved to sin, who as slaves cannot free themselves.

- “One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ ... Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God, it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and every incalculable blessing.” – Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520.

As our Lord healed many of their physical illnesses and afflictions through his powerful Word, so does that Word offer healing and wholeness to those invisible yet very real wounds that we are bearing, wounds that we may be reluctant to address because of the pain that the healing process may cause, yet wounds that need to be healed lest they affect our entire beings. A wound that is never tended to does not simply stay a wound but eventually threatens the health of the whole body. Our Lord offers us the gift of healing freedom that liberates us from the slavery our woundedness inflicts upon us. As we celebrate the legacy of the Reformation that made the Word of God accessible to all persons, may we make use of this liberating word that cleanses us of our sinfulness and heals the wounds that prevent us from living the life of freedom and abundance that our Lord desires for all of God’s people.

- “The good news of this text is that like them, we have a choice. We can acknowledge our wounds, our enslavements, our sins, and offer them up to the balm of the gospel. Or we can stand in our woundedness, waiting for the worst to come ... We have a choice, and that is good news.” _ Jacques.

Even though Mercurochrome is no longer on the shelves of our local pharmacies, the mere mention of its name brings back painful memories of that nasty red antiseptic stinging my childhood wounds. While I did not enjoy the experience then, I know that my parents used it so that my wound might be healed and I would no longer be affected by my woundedness. We may be reluctant to bring our woundedness to the Lord, but we know that when we open ourselves to the healing grace and freedom of our Lord, we will experience the liberation from everything that holds us in bondage so that we might experience the true freedom that is ours from the one who has come to set us free. May the healing power and presence of

the one who is the Word made flesh, the Word that is light and life, be for us the balm of the Gospel that is the source of our healing, our blessings, and our freedom.

Amen.