

October 30, 2022
Reformation Sunday
John 8:31-36
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Truly Free

What does it mean to be free? Jesus says in our gospel reading for today, “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 8:32). Later in the gospel reading he says, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). If this gospel reading is about freedom, we need to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be free?

I suspect that we all have some kind of definition of freedom. I suspect that many of us would say that we have been through a collective experience of lack of freedom; when we were huddled in our homes trapped there by the virus, many of us working from home, children doing online school, having to cancel travel plans, not being able to see family and friends. We were trapped, some of us alone dealing with the loneliness that that kind of isolation brought, while others of us were surrounded by the people in our household who had nowhere to go and no way to get space from each other.

Then when we could finally go out again, still things weren't normal. All kinds of new rules were in place to keep us safe, masks were required just about everywhere we went, hand sanitizer was everywhere, markings on the ground, signs on doors and walls reminded us to stay six feet apart.

We were freer, but we were still not free.

I remember those days, and I am certainly not nostalgic for them. I remember the fear, the strangeness, the panic, the isolation, the grief for

missed things, missed activities, missed moments and milestones. I remember the horror of hearing about people dying alone, separated from their families and friends at their moments of greatest need. I remember not being able to be there for members of my own congregation, when they needed pastoral care, not being able to visit, praying with people over the phone. I remember going months without communion.

But here's something that I also remember. I remember that first Sunday Zoom service that we had, when out of the deep silence, out of the terrifying isolation, we saw each other's faces again, we heard each other's voices again, and we realized that we were not in this alone, we realized that we could still be together as a church and as a community. But more than any of that, we realized that God was still with us. The silence was filled with singing, with words of scripture, with laughter, with people reaching out to each other with care and creativity, with comforting liturgy that promised us hope, "In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us." We learned and saw that even in that time of trial, that time of struggle and fear, God with us; with word, with community, and, after a few months, even with sacraments.

But all of that is behind us, at least for many of us. And now we might feel free. After all, we can pretty much go where we want now. The only places where masks are still required are medical facilities, although some of us might still chose to wear them with all of the colds and flu and still Covid going around. But still, that's a choice, not a requirement. Kids are back in school buildings, people can go to concerts, movies, and plays again, people can travel again, stadiums are packed with people for sporting events again, there are so many things that we missed that we can finally catch up on.

Pretty much, at least for most of us, we can do whatever we want.

So, we're free, right? That must be what freedom means.

But is it? Is that really what Jesus meant when he said, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Are we really as free as we think we are?

It was very interesting, when the pandemic was in full swing. A lot of churches saw their attendance dwindle from their normal, pre-pandemic levels. But we didn't. Our service on Zoom was strong, and if you also took into account the communion in the courtyard services that started in June of 2020, we found that our congregation stayed together pretty well. In fact, some could say that our fellowship grew as some of us got to know each other better through conversations on Zoom before or after worship. For some of the kids who attended Friday Night Live, our weekly youth group meeting that moved to Zoom during the height of the pandemic, Friday Night Live was the only social thing that they got to do during the week. Every week we would gather together on Zoom, and pray together and then play games over the computer and sometimes laugh until our faces hurt, and then, when we would share our highs and lows, the best parts and the worst parts of our week, many of the youth said that Friday Night Live was the highlight of their week.

For many, worship, even worship over Zoom, gave them a sense of continuity and community. It gave their weeks a sense of structure and, even though we couldn't have the sacrament of holy communion for a few months, it gave them a sense that they were in communion with God and with each other.

I don't know about you, but I've been pretty busy this fall. The return of ordinary life has kept me running from thing to thing to thing, work things,

home things, kid things, mostly good things, with some worries and stressors thrown in. But it keeps me going, morning to night. And honestly, sometimes, I don't feel that free.

I feel like societally, we're trying to make up for lost time, packing our days and our nights full of fun and important things to do, now that we're allowed to do them, running, running, running, so that we don't miss anything. And that's assuming that our schedules allow for choice and that we're not forced by circumstances of illnesses or some other kind of family crisis to spend every day trying to figure out how we're going to make it to the next day.

In fact, it seems that there's so much going on, blessing or struggle, good or bad, that sometimes it's hard to squeeze in that time for communion and connection with God that we might have treasured and recognized as essential during the height of the pandemic.

I'm sure that, this being Reformation Sunday, many of you expected me to spend this sermon talking about Martin Luther and his contributions to the church, Lutheran churches, of course, but also the one, holy catholic, and apostolic church. But honestly, while I still think that Martin Luther had helpful and important insights into God, grace, human nature, salvation, and the world, the situation that we are living in is something that Luther never experienced, the idea that worship was just one activity among many, to be chosen or not based on personal preference or time available. So, Luther isn't going to make much of an appearance in this sermon about life in 2022. But Jesus is, which honestly, would make Luther happier than a sermon about him.

Because Jesus knew that sometimes we seek to create freedom for ourselves, but what we end up finding, is more bondage. We get ourselves trapped.

The gospel reading talks about committing sin, it says, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34b). When we talk about committing sin, we’re usually talking about doing bad things, things that our society would frown on. But a more broad and biblical definition of sin is as separation from God. Sin has separated us from God and there’s nothing that we can do to undo that separation. We are stuck imagining that we can create our own freedom, sometimes imagining that relationship with God is itself some kind of bondage.

But our faith tells us that, even though we cannot act to end the separation between us and God, God can and God has. Jesus Christ has come into the world heal the separation between us and God, to bridge the great chasm, our alienation from God. For Jesus is the son who sets us free from sin. Jesus is the Son, the truth that makes us free.

But sometimes it’s hard to remember that when we are surrounded, when we are drowning in societal expectations and societal hatreds and political divisions and general angst. It can be hard to remember to turn to the Son, when we feel like we can’t keep our heads above water, whether the waves that are crashing over us are too much fun, too much success, or too many struggles and too much suffering.

Still Jesus comes to us, still Jesus says to us, all the time, in our times of joy and in our times of sorrow, that he is the truth that sets us free. And Jesus is with us, Jesus is Emmanuel. And in his word, and in his life, and in his love, we find freedom. Thanks be to God. Amen.