

“Freedom” (John 8)

Sermon on Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2022

Dear church,

In the movie Braveheart from the 1990's Mel Gibson plays Scottish freedom fighter William Wallace. We don't have to like the production. It's a bloody affair and the portrayal of the king's gay son is pure stereotyping from today's perspective. But one thing from that movie is forever memorable to me, even as it shows Hollywood's weakness for melodrama. Wallace, before he is executed, is invited to say one last thing. He takes the opportunity and belts out a scream that seems to reach the ends of the earth, shaking the power structures of the time. One word: freedom! It is one of humanity's deepest yearnings and we so much like to think we have made progress since the so-called dark ages. But still, in the year 2022, by the narrow definition of the freedoms we treasure in this country, most people on our planet are not free. Women in Iran risk their lives protesting, showing nothing more than their hair and face. People in Russia are constantly brainwashed. People in China are under enormous constraints. People in the US: are we free? Let us not be afraid to ask that question because it's not as simple as it seems. Are we free?

The gospel for Reformation Sunday brings freedom to our attention. Jesus says, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Ironically, he is speaking to people who were at that very time dominated by a foreign power, under the iron fist of the Roman emperor. He is speaking to people whose experience of slavery in Egypt was baked into their identity, never to be forgotten, the Exodus story, the Moses narrative. “Never forget that you were slaves in Egypt,” God says many times in the Hebrew Scriptures. And yet they have the gall to say to Jesus with a straight face, “We are Abraham's children and have never been slaves to anyone.” Wow! That shows us the human power of deception! It has always been there. We know how to deceive ourselves and that ability or disability to fool ourselves is enemy number one when it comes to our freedom. Are we free?

I changed today's gospel just enough so that we don't have to talk about the Jewish people as is the case in the original setting in John 8, but we can talk about ourselves - because the issue raised here is not meant for any one ethnic or religious group. It's universal. We often think we are free when we are not. Let me give you an example. A person who attacks others, using prejudice, putting people down in the name of freedom of speech, is that person free? If you ask Jesus, the answer is no. That person is probably a slave of sin, to use the language of the gospel. What feels like freedom (I can finally speak my mind!) may just be an outgrowth of a cancer that grows inside. And you know, the freedom that a cancer enjoys in our organism benefits only the cancer; it never benefits you. The cancer is happy to grow and be very free, but it kills us. So, let us be suspicious of people who claim to be free and have no respect for their fellow human beings. Their subjective sense of freedom allows them to become cancers in society. Is it freedom to beat up someone else? Jesus would say no. Rather, you are a slave of sin.

For our gathering with a Jewish youth group from Ambler earlier this year I pulled out Martin Luther's wonderful statement at the beginning of his tract "Freedom of a Christian person." He wrote this: "*A Christian is an utterly free person, lord of all, subject to none*". And then he followed it up with another sentence: "*A Christian is an utterly dutiful person, servant of all, subject to all.*" I have always appreciated this paradoxical pair of statements, Luther essentially telling us that at the core of true freedom is a paradox. You can only be truly free when you are able to give up that freedom, when you love and serve others and when you do it from your own volition. You are not free to cause harm, you are not free to hate, you are not free to disrespect, not even yourself. You are not free to be self-centered. You are not free to lie. All that bluster of self-serving freedom is only showing proof that you are a slave of sin. That's how Jesus would say it. Are we free in America?

In this gospel passage Jesus corrected the Jewish people of his time because they had a little chip on their shoulder; it's called the "chosen people" syndrome. If we are honest, we will acknowledge that Americans also have a case of chosen people syndrome. Whenever people say, "We are free and nobody can tell us what to do; we are the best;

we are the gold standard,” be careful. That’s not my advice, it’s the advice of our Lord. Such statements portray not freedom but a certain imprisonment. But when the Son sets us free, we are truly free – free to serve, free to love, free to lift up others, free to be respectful, free to be a functioning democracy, free to fail, free to succeed, free to forgive ourselves, free to forgive others, free to try new things, free to stick with what we know best. The freedom given to us when we are set free in the deepest part of our souls is infinite, limitless. A person who has been freed like that will be free even in prison. So, are we free in this country?

With William Wallace I want to scream “freedom” because it’s obvious we are not free yet. It’s obvious in every hate mail and in every act of violence we witness. We have been masters of deceiving ourselves as a society and our Lord asks us to find true freedom in Him, not accepting false forms of freedom that only feed evil. Let us pray for our country, for our people, especially as we move to another election. May we be liberated from bullies, from lies, from false prophets! May we find the true freedom of the children of God! May the Son set us free!

Amen.