The Festival of the Reformation

30 October, Anno Domini 2016

St. John 3:31-36

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There has been a whole lot of talk these days about freedom. Our nation is deeply divided about what freedom really is and what freedoms are rightly allowed under the governance of the Constitution. On the one hand, many are appalled at the rate at which the rights to life and religious expression are being eroded and cast aside. On the other hand, there are those whose chief concern is that no one stand in their way of saying, being, or doing whatever it is they want. Tolerate everything except those who disagree. I have seen more angst and hand wringing this election cycle than I can ever remember. Like all the elections before, this one is the most important and the fate of the world hangs on the man or woman sitting behind the desk in the Oval Office.

There couldn’t be a better time for us to hear these words of Jesus. It is good that our Lord put a stop to our foolish worrying about foolish things and draw us back to the truth. It is time that our eyes be drawn up again, away from temporal concerns and temporal rulers. No matter what our concerns may be as November 8 approach, all our ungodly worrying and anger point to a very simple and common reality for all - we are all slaves. We are slaves to fear, to power, to hatred, to men. What is more idolatrous than to imagine that those elected to positions of authority will deliver us from whatever we perceive as a danger - whether it be bigotry, terrorists, economic collapse, or the destruction of the family?

Dearly beloved, repent of your senseless worrying. Jesus Christ, ruler of all things in heaven and on earth, who has stepped down from His heavenly hall and clothed Himself in your flesh, has brought to you true and everlasting freedom, the only freedom that actually matters, the freedom that shatters the iron shackles of sin and death, tyrants far more terrible and eternal than any earthly despot.

But freedom only tastes sweet to those who recognize the great and terrible slavery that binds them. Do you hear the thundering of the Law? Are you willing to gaze deeply into the mirror of the Ten Commandments and confront the bitter truth that your will and your desires, sold into slavery in Eden, are filled with perversity and selfishness? It’s terrifying, to be sure. We don’t have to dig too deeply in order to uncover our treachery. Our flesh seeks comfort in pleasure and in ease. It’s first thought is self-protection and preservation. If we are at peace with the world, if we can avoid suffering and pain, we are content. All that our good and gracious God declares to be evil, we crave. We want to taste its poison. That is how completely sold into sin we are. We actually want the things of death. We want to return to Egypt because it offers pleasures more fleeting than the breath we just took.

And worse than our crass sins of life is how quickly we turn aside from the pure Word and doctrine of Christ. Like pigs, we are thrown a feast and we turn up our noses so that we can instead feed from the trash pile. The Lord Jesus stands before us offering us free salvation which He purchased with nothing less than His own precious Blood, poured out on the altar of the cross and now poured out to you in the Holy Communion. Yet how quickly we despise this great treasure! How quickly we content ourselves by looking for solace and rest in the Law and our own goodness.

Be sure of this, you who would be saved by the Law, the Law will be satisfied with nothing less than absolute perfection. It isn’t enough to put on the outward show. You may impress men and they may praise you, but, as Luther writes “The Law wills and demands our will.” Your HEART must be pure before God. To satisfy the Law you MUST love God and your neighbor with only the purest motives. There can’t be an ounce of selfish desire or you have failed and the guilty verdict against you will stand and you will pay with your soul in the unquenchable fires of hell. What is the presidency of Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, the loss of your inalienable rights, or an Islamic caliphate, compared to that? The conscience can’t know a greater dictator than the Law because it is both absolute and eternal. It can’t be reasoned with or bribed or fooled.

But now, to you, apart from the law, apart from its strict demands, the righteousness of God has been revealed. This is a righteousness that can only be given as a gift. It is a revelation that defies all reasonableness and wisdom. It is a righteousness that utterly frustrates and infuriates your Old Adam who can’t stand being told that he is evil and can do absolutely nothing good or holy or pleasing to God. And it is a righteousness that frees you from the insatiable jaws of eternal death. It is God’s righteousness which is freely given to all who cling by faith to Jesus Christ. Hear again the good news - your sins have been removed from you, the full punishment of your guilt has been laid upon God’s Son and He has gladly paid the price - every last drop of Blood for every last sin of every man, woman, and child, slave, or free, Democrat or Republican, citizen or alien. The distinctions of men have no place in the kingdom of God for all have sinned alike and all have been equally redeemed by God by setting forth the propitiation of Jesus’ Blood.

You, the baptized, have been set free. In your baptism your sin was drowned for all of eternity in the endless flood of Jesus’ mercy which pours out fresh to you each and every day. This Word, this truth, this Gospel is eternal because the promises of God are eternal. Your sin is not stronger or more definitive than the absolving Word of Christ which sets you free from death and the hopeless delusion that there is anything you can or must do in order to escape the prison house of hell.

But beware. Guard this Word with all your might. Abide in it. Don’t just pay it lip service. Meditate and pray on it. Hear it daily and treasure it because you are surrounded by enemies whose entire will is bent on stealing it from you and casting you back into slavery forever. They would consume you with despair and pride. The pure doctrine of Christ’s Word of completely unmerited mercy and forgiveness distributed in Word and water and meal is the mighty fortress behind whose walls you may rest in complete security, though devils all the world should (and do) fill. Turn away from sin and abhor it and pray that the Holy Spirit of God would strengthen you in the hour of temptation and stir up in you a fervent desire for all that is good and true and right.

Rejoice, beloved of God, for the Son has set you free. Rulers and nations and constitutions will rise and fall. This whole evil world and its devil will soon be cast away from God’s children forever. Their time is short. Their foolishness and their lies will come to an end. But as the great motto of the Reformation so beautifully reminds us “The Word of the Lord endures forever.”

In the Name of +Jesus.