

The Festival of the Reformation  
31 October, Anno Domini 2021  
St. John 3:31-36  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

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 recognized and protected 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 definition of freedom is defined by the ability to eschew cultural, moral, and biological norms. We have certainly seen politically turbulent days in the past, just as all other nations have and continue to. But these days seem different. It appears as though very fundamental realities of our existence are under assault and the consequences will be far reaching.

Our forebears in the faith fought through such days and by God's grace remained faithful. At the time of the Reformation, the kingdoms of the right and left hands were deeply entangled. Kings were appointing popes and popes were crowning kings. The threat of the Turks marching on the Holy Roman Empire were real and demanded a united front to repulse. Emperor Charles V recognized a division over the faith could be catastrophic for the Empire. Angering the German princes could cost Charles their support in the war. Failing to stamp out the Reformation would likely mean the loss of the support of the Roman Catholic Church. But our faithful ancestors understood that something of far greater importance was at stake than the loss of territory - the truth of the salvation of all people by grace through faith in Christ. They recognized that it would be far better to suffer Charles' wrath and the wrath of the Turks with a clean conscience before God than to bow to the false doctrines of Rome and Charles' sword only to suffer eternal death and the wrath of God. They recognized that Satan was working feverishly to stamp out the Gospel.

And that is exactly what our ancient enemy, the great deceiver, is still trying to do. He is using every weapon at his disposal to press against the faithful and against Christ's Church. How good, then, to hear these words of Jesus. It is good that our Lord puts a check on our foolish worrying about foolish things and draw us back to the truth. Our eyes, our hearts, and our minds desperately need to be drawn away from temporal concerns and temporal rulers. We need to be made mindful again of the true threats, the eternal dangers, and the demonic enemies that surround us. It is imperative that we not miss the forest for the trees. No matter what our concerns may be as the political and cultural turmoil swirl around us, 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 or appointed to positions of authority will deliver us from whatever we perceive as a danger - whether it be bigotry, terrorists, economic collapse, death, disease, or the destruction of the family? How foolish of us to place our confidence in those who, like us, are here today and gone tomorrow and forgotten?

Dearly beloved, repent of setting your eyes and hearts on the things of this world. Repent of allowing yourself to be distracted from your true need and the real enemy. Repent of your worrying about things that your heavenly Father has already promised to provide. 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 and rescues from 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? We don't have to dig too deeply in order to uncover our treachery. It is terrifying, to be sure. It is humiliating. Our flesh seeks comfort in pleasure and in ease. It's first thought is self-protection and preservation in this life. 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 even knowing that it is 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 as fleeting as 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 try to be comforted 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 will you have gained if you have resisted the tyranny of men here on earth but ignored the tyranny of eternal judgment? Both are important, to be sure. But only one last forever. 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 and redemption has been equally offered by God to all by setting forth the propitiation of Jesus' Blood. No ruler or man-made institution or law can provide this to you.

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. This Word is your great heritage and inheritance. It is the true treasure that moth and rust cannot destroy, that even the most tyrannical dictators can take from you though they take everything, even your life. It keeps you in life and by it the Son of God has set you free from death.

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 is proclaimed to you and distributed in water and meal. It 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, stirring 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.

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord.