

SERMON
REFORMATION SUNDAY
October 25, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A few years ago, I went to Lutherhill with some of the youth from our congregation. Of course, as most of you know, Lutherhill is our Synod's Camp in LaGrange, Texas.

When we went, they had just completed building a new rock climbing wall. Now, to be honest, I am not one that is comfortable in high places. As a matter of fact, I am deathly afraid of heights. But there I stood, looking up at this wall which towered about three stories high.

And then, I noticed something called a "zip line" running from the top of the platform to a tree about 100 yards away. This is a line that you hook your harness onto and then just jump off the platform and zoom down to the ground. My initial thought was "NO WAY". But of course there was all of this peer pressure.

Our wonderful youth were saying "Come on Pastor, you can do it. What are you, a wimp?" Well that's all it took. I said my prayers and figured that if I die, at least I would not be remembered as a wimp.

So I strapped on my harness, put on my helmet, and triple checked the carabineers to make sure that they were fastened properly. Then I joined in the verbal ritual: "On Belay," "Belay on," "Climbing," "Climb on."

I started up the wall. I didn't look down, because I figured that if I did, it would be all over. I climbed and climbed without stopping until I got to the top. When I finally pulled myself up on the platform, my hands were shaking so bad that I could hardly secure myself to the zip line.

So there I stood – on the top of a platform three stories in the air. I knew that I had to get down somehow. I figured that the “zip line” was probably the quickest. So I just said a prayer, closed my eyes, and jumped. And I am glad to say that I am still here to talk about it to this day. I will say one thing; climbing takes a lot of trust.

Now you may wonder why I told this story. Well, thinking back on it, it had a lot to do with what it means to be free. For it was only because I was hooked up to a rope with someone holding me that I was free to climb. I could climb from one place to another using the tension of the rope.

I could even let go completely and still be safe. I was free because I was anchored to the one holding the rope. Perhaps this is how we can see Jesus. We are free when Jesus is our anchor.

In our Gospel story today, Jesus says “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

As we celebrate this Reformation Sunday, we look at what it means to be truly free.

When Jesus was teaching, he tells some of his Jewish followers that if they continue in his word, they will be truly free. But they react in almost shock. They denied that they needed anybody to free them. “We’re Abraham’s descendants,” they said. “We’ve never been slaves,” they claimed. “How can you say that we need to be set free?” they cried.

Talk about short memories. What about all of that Exodus stuff? What about that whole “Moses-leading-them-out-of-SLAVERY-in-Egypt-thing.” Wasn’t that central to their faith? But all of a sudden, they get amnesia.

What about all of those years of captivity in Babylon where they pleaded for God to free them? And what about the Roman soldiers that were parading up and down their streets? What about the oppressive Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilate? How could any Jew ever forget about all that stuff?

Nevertheless, the Jewish believers in today’s Gospel story say that they do not remember. Maybe they just didn’t want to hear what Jesus was saying to them – that they were indeed slaves.

However, Jesus wasn’t even talking about that kind of slavery. Instead, Jesus says to them; “Anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” Boy that’s hard to hear – even for us today. It’s always easier to hear that other people have a sin problem.

But it’s hard to hear that we are the ones who are slaves to sin and need to be freed. You see, Jesus was redefining what it meant to be a slave and what it means to be free.

Military officers have an interesting saying. Whenever they commit a serious gaffe – when they seriously mess up, they often say: “I fell on my sword.” Meaning, “Boy, did I ever screw up.” The person who falls on their sword has self-destructed or done something that obviously reflects badly on them.

We too fall on our swords, more often than not. We say, “I’ll never do that again!” How many times have we said those words just after doing something that we later regret? The guilt and the anguish that follows is sometimes unbearable. And we say “never again.”

But before we know it, there it is – that same ugly sinfulness rises to the surface. You all know what I am talking about. We want to do good – we try our hardest, yet no matter how hard we try, we still fall.

And when that happens, there are usually three ways that we try to deal with our sinfulness. We either get selective amnesia and just try and put it out of our minds. Or secondly, we try and justify our behavior in some way by saying that there are many other people out there who are a lot worse than me, or it wasn't my fault in the first place.

Or finally, we try to jump through some hoops to vindicate ourselves. Through our guilt, we try to DO something that can earn God's favor again.

This is the one that began the Reformation of the Church 500 years ago. For at that time, it was taught that one could earn God's forgiveness by buying indulgences or paying money to the Church to look at relics. Some would join monasteries and physically abuse their bodies as some sort of payment for God's grace.

In other words, God's favor and forgiveness were for sale. And the Church was more than willing to reap the profits. Also, God was seen as a vengeful judge, just waiting to "get us" when we fall. This is what tormented Martin Luther day and night.

But as he studied the Scriptures, he found a picture of a different God – a God of love and grace. He came across the words of Paul that we heard in our second reading where Paul writes: "For those who have faith in Christ, there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Paul went on to say; "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."

This was so freeing for Martin Luther. It was like a 10 ton weight was lifted off of his shoulders. And it can do the same for us. Of course it doesn't mean that we can now sin all we want. It means that because that burden has now been lifted, we are now free to serve God and others while remaining anchored in our faith in Christ.

Remember the story I told at the beginning. It was only because I was anchored at the bottom of the rock wall that I was free to climb.

It's kind of like a guitar string. A guitar string can be rolled up and placed in a package. It's free. But it is not free to be what it is supposed to be, or to do what it is supposed to do.

That only happens when it's strung down the long neck of a guitar and the keys are turned and it is tightened until it is taut. Its freedom comes, not in being separated from everything; but in being set apart to do what it was made to do.

That's how it is with us. God made us to be in relationship with Him and others. God made us to love and to care for all of God's creation. And that is where we will find true freedom.

You see, so many of us look to be free – indeed we yearn to be free. But we try to do it on our own. We think that if we just make enough money we will be financially free. We think that if we get enough alarms on our homes we will be free from being a victim of crime.

We think that because we can do anything we want as long as it does not hurt others, we are free. As a nation, we believe that if we attain enough military might, we can assure our freedom.

But this is not the freedom that Jesus is talking about. Jesus says that our freedom only comes through a relationship with Him.

Therefore, we can be free no matter what our circumstances. Even if we are locked up in some prison in a hostile foreign country, we can still be free.

For our freedom is in Christ Jesus, who would make the “Reformation” of the church more than an event in the year 1517 that we remember.

Rather, it is an ongoing reality for each of us today as we hear God’s Word, celebrate the Sacraments, and go forth into the world proclaiming this Good News of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. For because of Christ, we are free! Free to love, free to serve, free to be all that God has made us to be. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.