

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

October 31, 1517. A 33 year-old college professor posted an invitation to a debate on the public message board of his college town. In those days, the door of the castle church served the same purpose that Chadrad or Facebook or a Google group serves today. By posting his message on the church door, Professor Martin Luther knew that he was making a public statement. And by posting his message on October 31; the eve of All Saints Day, he knew that lots of people would see it, because All Saints Day was when lots of people came to church to remember the lives of their relatives.

Luther's invitation was to come and participate in a public discussion about the authority of the Roman Catholic church to forgive sins. The church was offering people – well, actually, it was selling people something called an indulgence. For a certain fee, either you or a loved one who had already died received the promise that the time you had to spend in purgatory would be reduced and you could proceed straight to heaven. An indulgence was a sort of 'get-out-of-jail-free' card. Brother Martin opposed this practice and nailed 95 theses – points of argument – on the door of the castle church. He invited people to come and debate these practices. Are they really about pardon and forgiveness of sins? Or are they about the Pope needing to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome?

As they used to say in the 16th century, the message went viral. A new technology was available to Luther – the printing press – and within a month, copies of the 95 Theses had been carried all through Germany and had even made it all the way to Rome. Professor Luther unleashed his invitation to debate all across the Christian world of his time, and we today are the heirs of the movement he began to reform the church.

I want to highlight a sentence from today's Gospel reading: "The truth will make you free." There's an attractive sound bite for you. The problem is that when we take this phrase out of its context in the Gospel of John, we think we can define freedom in any way we want. And here in the United States, in 2017, in this election year, we have a tendency to define "freedom" in terms of individualism, to say that freedom means that each person has the right to live out his or her personal choices. And that as long as those choices don't hurt anyone else, no one can stop you from pursuing your own personal freedom.

Nothing could be further from what Jesus was talking about. Jesus knew nothing of representative democracy. He lived in occupied territory, land that had been conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and finally the Romans. It had been 1,000 years since King David had ruled over a unified land. Jesus' words this morning come to us in the context of heated dispute with the Jewish leaders. In the very next verse, Jesus accuses his opponents of wanting to kill him. A few verses later, he calls them children of the devil and they accuse him of being possessed by a demon. At least we didn't hear language like that in the presidential debates.

Jesus resisted the Jewish leaders who accused him of blasphemy. He also resisted those who wanted him to "make Israel great again." Jesus did not allow himself to be co-opted by those who wanted a king. The Messiah was not born in the halls of power but in a feed stall in a borrowed house in a backwater town. All through John's gospel, whenever Jesus speaks of his glory, he is talking about his death. Over and over in the gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that he is headed to Jerusalem where he will be humiliated, tortured and killed, and they refuse to believe him. But what he told them came to pass. Eventually the religious leaders got the Romans to put Jesus to death. And his glory was revealed, not on

a throne, but on the cross. By the standards of politics and power that values winning at all costs, Jesus was the biggest loser of all time.

Martin Luther knew nothing of representative democracy. He lived in a province of Germany ruled by a prince who had inherited his title and his power. He lived in a time when the Roman Catholic Church was deeply involved in politics and the Pope was the most powerful ruler in Europe. He had the audacity to ask why the church had turned forgiveness into a commodity. Forgiveness is not for sale. Forgiveness is God's gift, given to us in the blood of Jesus as he hung dying on the cross. And the words that he spoke from the cross: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." – those words are the words of freedom.

There is nothing you can do to earn that forgiveness. There is nothing you can say that will bring you any closer to God. There is no climbing a ladder of personal holiness. There is no "accepting Jesus as your personal savior." There is no setting out to achieving your highest and best. Jesus has already done it. Jesus has already said it. Jesus has already accepted you, sinner that you are. Jesus died for you before you were even born. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."

The heart of Martin Luther's insight is this: We have been made free in Christ. But gospel freedom is not freedom to do whatever we please. We have been freed in Christ to love and serve our neighbors. Freedom is found when we are in relationship with God and with those around us, whoever they may be.

In nine more days we will go to vote for a new president for this nation. I know that anxiety is running high. There is real pain in many people's lives – pain of illness and

addiction and violence. There is real fear that our younger generation will not live in the kind of prosperity that their parents and grandparents have. There is real alienation from people who have a different color of skin or who were not born in this country. There is real hostility toward those who seem to have cut the line to take jobs or benefits or scholarships.

There is also real danger in thinking that any politician can save us, individually or collectively. There is real danger in claiming that any one political party, or any one civic ideology, or any one government policy holds the simple answer to the complex issues that face this nation. And there is real danger when religion cozies up to secular power in order to be on the “winning side.” That is true idolatry.

You should go and exercise your right as a citizen to vote on November 8. I plan to. And on November 9 we will wake up with a new president of this grand and beautiful nation.

But never forget: God alone has the power to save us, to free us. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, we have been freed to live together as faithful people in a way that belies everything these politicians tell us. We have been freed in Christ to find value in what they tell us is worthless. We have been freed in Christ to find power in what they tell us is weakness. We have been freed in Christ to see the image of God in people whom they tell us to reject. We have been freed in Christ to love and serve our neighbors.

I love Reformation Day because it is good to be reminded of where we came from. I love Reformation Day because it challenges us to look for the all places that need to hear this good news. God’s work is never done. When we feed our hungry neighbors; when we care for each other with our prayers and our phone calls; when we commit our resources to

this congregation and the synod; when we welcome someone new into Christ's body through baptism. When we take a breath and count to 10 instead of jumping into an argument, it is God's work that we do.

If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. And that is the best news of all.