

Introductory

In the TLH one-year lectionary, the reading for Reformation Sunday is Matthew 11: 12-15. In the LW three-year series, this John text is appointed to be read every year. In the LSB three-year lectionary, Matthew 11: 12-19 is the first choice, and this reading from John 8 is given as the alternative. I generally alternate between the one and the other, not necessarily year by year.

This year, I am using the John text, which speaks to the freedom we have in the Gospel, a very Lutheran thing for a very Lutheran celebration. I will probably end up talking about the state of Lutheranism world-wide and try to communicate to the hearer a wider context of geography as well as time. If we're talking numbers of confessional Lutherans, that number is not large.

If we're talking about the number of places where Lutheranism is, that number is increasing. Whenever we take a trip, especially if we're going across the ocean, I check out the church situation at the place where we will be on Sunday(s). If we can find an LCMS church or two, that's where we will go, and if we can't find that, then we'll go somewhere else and not commune, of course.

When I searched "Lutheran Church Italy" I got hits about Lutheran missionaries going there in the 18th Century. They were promptly killed. Then other Lutheran missionaries went, and they were also killed. That was the end of Lutheran missionary efforts to Italy, until just recently. We have sent missionaries to Italy, and they were not killed. Neither are our missionaries to Spain et al.

In fact, the IDE President goes to Spain to teach Lutheran theology, and they don't kill him either. Take a look at the numbers and locations of LCMS Missionaries at the web site, and you will see that there are a lot more than there used to be, and they are in a lot more places. The apathy of the Europeans et al towards religion is our opportunity to pick up where we left off many years ago.

The Lutheran Reformation Continues.

In the Matthew text, He talks about violence done against Christians and the Church. In the John text, we find ourselves in the middle of an escalating conflict between Jesus and "The Jews," and these people who are fighting with Jesus come off looking not good, and that's always going to be just a little bit awkward.

Even though Jesus and the writers on the NT were all Jews, for us Gentiles – or "true Jews," as Jesus and Paul call us – to talk about inter-Jewish conflict would rub some people the wrong way.

I will often avoid talking about “the Jews” or even “Jewish people,” and instead will talk about “Jesus’ own people,” or “those of His own religion,” or “His religious leaders.”

The people in the pew well know that Jesus was a Jew – and I might remind them of that, just make sure – and they also know that they themselves meticulously avoid using the term “the Jews,” especially if they are around people of the Jewish persuasion. This is not the hill that you want to die on, and needlessly causing offense will detract from our very important message.

In the same manner, if we are going to talk about slavery, like Jesus talks about slavery, we ought to tread carefully. Almost by consensus, Americans believe that our greatest national sin has been the enslavement of exclusively black people, and the toleration of same by the rest of the country.

It doesn’t matter that my ancestors or your ancestors never owned slaves, and this will always be a hot-button topic for black people in America. I’m not saying that we should not talk about slavery, and maybe even reference the kind of slavery that Americans know best, I’m just saying that we should be aware, and be a little bit careful when treading though that mine field.

Reformation time was a hard time for the Church. The unity of the Church was fractured, seemingly – so far – beyond repair, and with that disunity came conflict, violence, upheaval, loss, and even the deaths of many people. Christian nation warred with Christian nation over its own particular brands of our religion, and the results of those wars are still felt today.

Besides that, there were words exchanged between the parties involved. Those words were often harsh and condemnatory, mimicking the way that Jesus often spoke to the religious leaders of His time, and cool, calm logic did not always rule the day. It’s been over five hundred years now, and things have calmed down a little bit, and that’s mostly a good thing.

If earlier generations were overly proud of their Lutheran heritage, then later generations have been more subdued about it. A lot of Lutherans almost seem to be embarrassed to be a Lutheran. I know I was. I went to public schools for the first twelve years, and if the subject of religion ever came up, I would say that I was “protestant.” There, that was easy.

Four years at CTCRF (now CUC) and four more at CTSFW and thirty-three years as ordained LCMS clergy have changed me for the better, and I am content being a “Lutheran Pastor” and not the least embarrassed by it, or by what it means. People like Ken Schurb and Paul McCain and others have written some very good material about not being embarrassed to be a Lutheran.

Speaking of truth, this might be a good Sunday to talk about Postmodernism. If you don't know about Postmodernism, then get Gene Veith's book, *Postmodern Times*, dirt cheap at Amazon. If you don't have time for that, or don't like to read, go the WIK, always a good starting point, and in this case maybe a sufficient ending point.

The best definition of Postmodern art is still the one uttered by bartender Moe Szyslak, "weird for the sake of weird." Much of what passes for theology in the Postmodern era could be defined in the same way. In the postmodern era, concepts like true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly are thrown into the trash heap of old ideas that just don't work anymore.

In the postmodern era, my truth may not be your truth, and something you see as bad I may see as good, but at the end of the day all that is really important is that nothing is important and it's okay if we have different ideas about right and wrong, God, and the like. This sort of thinking often comes out in the form of opinions.

I have my opinion, you have yours, and there's really no point in trying to reconcile mine with yours, because that's "just your opinion." Without even being aware of it, most of them maybe having or not heard the term "postmodern" in passing, but mostly being completely unaware that a postmodern philosophical movement exists, Americans nevertheless think like this.

I often notice it the first time I talk to a new group of catechumens, who sense that something is different about this guy. He is talking to us in terms of truth and falsehood, and he doesn't seem to even care about my opinion on these things, and I'm used to having opinions, and having them listened to by teaches, and then being commended for that opinion, no matter how silly or lame.

In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom talks about freshmen in college, who hear him talking like I talk, and they are taken aback. He tells of one young man, who finally asked him, "'Are you an absolutist?'" the only alternative they know, uttered in the same tone as 'Are you a monarchist?' or 'Do you really believe in witches?'"

So maybe before we even begin to talk about the solas, we need to warn our hearers that we will be speaking to them in a way that may be different from the way that they are accustomed to being addressed. Of course, you could say that on any Sunday, but especially on this Sunday. You might even want to teach Postmodernism as a vocabulary word.

So here we come on Reformation Sunday, talking about Martin Luther and absolute truth and goodness, condemning falsehood and maybe talking about how people fought over and even sometimes died for their beliefs about God. I'm not saying not to talk about those things. Do talk about those things when appropriate and edifying.

I'm saying that it may be good to frame the Reformation in a context different in many ways from our own context, so that the hearer comes to a better understanding of what Reformation was all about; it was about truth, as taken in an objective, absolute way from the Bible, the way that Jesus talks about here.

To understand what is going on here – and you can say this about every text – we need to have a context, wider and immediate. This reading isn't like what we've been doing all summer and into fall, with Mark moving with Jesus from one incident to the next, in mostly chronological order, with the occasional omission of material along the way.

Here we find ourselves sort of plopped down in the Gospel of John, in the middle of an ongoing and increasingly heated discussion about slavery, freedom, and the meaning of being Jewish. This exchange begins at the beginning of the chapter, where we find Jesus in Jerusalem, at the Temple, teaching people who were there to learn from Him.

He and His students are very rudely interrupted by some "Scribes and Pharisees (2)," who have in their custody a woman caught in adultery. The people who bring the woman to Jesus know their OT Law, especially the part about stoning adulterous women, but they do not seem to remember the part about stoning adulterous men.

But what they really want to know is what Jesus thinks they should do with this sinful woman. Well, they don't actually want to know what Jesus thinks. It's another trap question, and Jesus must have become weary of such queries. John, who was there, tells us that they interrupted Bible Study like they did to "test" Jesus.

As often happens, the hunters quickly become the hunted, and Jesus tacks a course that can lead to no other destination than that the stoners, one by one, drop their stones, and sort of fade back into the cracks in the walls and holes in the ground, from whence they had come. That could not have made those men feel good about themselves, and they held it against Jesus.

But the Pharisees remain (13), and we don't know if some of them have re-emerged from walls and ground, or if these are a new crop. Almost certainly it is the same group who brought the adulterous woman, sans the Scribes. While these men wanted to talk about executing a woman for adultery, Jesus wants to talk about different, loftier, more important things.

He starts talking about Himself in a way that makes them uncomfortable, "I am the light of the world," the Pharisees call Him a liar, and the gloves come off and it starts to get ugly, and that's how it's going to go when you call the Perfect One a liar. He says they are not from His father, and that they can't come to the place where He is going. He tells them they are from below.

He says that He speaks on the authority of the Father, and no religious leader is going to like to be talked to like that. Those incendiary words from the lips of Jesus did indeed light a fire in these proud, educated, intelligent leaders of Judaism, who thought very highly of themselves and clearly could not, for the collective life of them, understand who He thinks He is.

While many did not like what He said, it does not say that they went away, and yet a clear shift in audience occurs in v. 30, where it says that “many believed in Him,” meaning that on some level they were buying what He was selling. The corollary is that there were also many who did not believe in Him, but it is not to them, but to those believers that He now speaks.

Textual Notes

31. It is to them He directs what He says next; “Ἐλεγεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πρὸς τοὺς πεπιστευκότας αὐτῷ Ἰουδαίους – Jesus said to those Jews believing in Him.” The “οὖν – therefore” tells us that what He is about to say is a continuation of the conversation immediately preceding, which began with the woman caught in adultery, and morphs into some fairly weighty theological matters.

Observing that many who heard Him “believed – ἐπίστευσαν” (v. 30) in Him, He speaks to them, to “τοὺς πεπιστευκότας, - those having believed,” a perfect participle. The focus is on a current condition, the present result of a past action. Their belief seems questionable, it will continue to be tested, and as this chapter plays out, these “believers” become increasingly hostile to Jesus.

Those who believe in Him, He says in another place, are like the same seeds planted into different kinds of soil, and some of them will take root and grow, but other things will happen to others, and in the end, they will not make it. He advises and exhorts them, Ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ, ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἔστε – if you remain in My Word, you are truly My Disciples.”

It’s a conditional statement, and if you’re doing Law and Gospel, this is Law. The Law tells us to do things that are good for us, and it tells us not to do things that are bad for us. The reason why Jesus tells them to remain in His Word is because that’s how we stay connected to Him, how our faith is nurtured by that Word, because that’s how the Christian stays alive and lives forever.

How does one remain in the Word? The easiest way to remain in the Word is to go to church on Sunday morning, and any other time when The Word is being proclaimed, but mostly on Sunday. People will want more than that, pressing people to come to various Bible studies, or pressing the pastor to have more Bible studies. Those are good things, but it all begins with church on Sunday.

Given the large percentage of members who regularly absent themselves from Church, and given the increasing number of American Christians who give little thought at all to church, and given

the large number of people who are completely apathetic about our religion, and an even larger number who are hostile to it, if you show up on Sunday morning, that's good enough for me.

Now if you want to add to Sunday morning, we could start adding church services during the week, like the larger churches in the larger cities sometimes do in all of Christendom. Even a small, small-town church down the road does weekly Matins on a weekday. Mid-week Bible studies are a good thing, especially if the pastor is teaching, and daily home and family devotions are good.

That's the conditional, and as this thing plays out, it looks like some of these believers will – maybe He's not Who we thought He was. Such remaining in the word is not done in a vacuum or without practical benefit. The conditional “if you remain in the Word, then “ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἐστε – you are truly my disciples” but not “you are my true disciples.” It's a adverb, not an adjective.

We are sometimes hesitant to correlate “remaining in the Word” with being a Christian, and for good reason. Doing the things above does not make one a Christian, nor does Jesus say that they do. What He does say is that the person who is in the Word is the truly a “μαθηταὶ –disciple” a word that means “one who learns.” One who refuses or neglects to learn cannot be called that.

There is really nothing profound in saying that the person who exposes himself to a lot of Word is going to learn more about his God and his religion, and he is generally more likely to remain in that religion, than the person who avoids such contact. As far as learning beyond Sunday morning, I have a core group who want to learn more, who also happen to be the most knowledgeable.

32. Besides that, an additional practical benefit of remaining in the Word “γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς – you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” This is a wonderful promise, and one to which Christians ought to take heed. By the way, if you mention the movie *Pulp Fiction* in connection with this verse, they will know that you have seen it.

They may even be distracted by thoughts like; Did the Pastor really just say that he's seen *Pulp Fiction*? Can't unthink that! If he's seen that movie, what other raunchy, violent, filthy, putrid Quentin Tarantino flicks have they seen? They may even have watched some Martin Scorsese stuff. I wonder if they subscribe to Showtime... Not everybody is aware of every show we watch.

When it comes to knowing about things, truly knowing about things, the least intelligent orthodox Christian runs circles around the most brilliant, highly educated multiple-Ph. D scholar who doesn't believe the Bible, especially if the Ph. D is a bible scholar. Those are some of the most messed up people on the planet. Except for Postmodernism, which believes anything and nothing

In my book, Modern Philosophy is pretty much dead. Nobody cares, and nobody cares because it's been such a long time since anybody has come up with a new philosophy that is cogent and can be actually understood by a normal person. The philosophy of Pragmatism can be understood; you live your life in a pragmatic manner, and a lot of Americans are very pragmatic people.

Ancient philosophies like Hedonism and Stoicism are likewise understandable, as were the earlier Western thinkers. Not so much these days. Anything in the American Philosophical Quarterly – for example – is almost guaranteed to be incomprehensible to the human mind, and Logic and Rhetoric have been twisted from their origins so as to be unrecognizable as what they really are.

The Modern Scientific Movement, begun by Christians who presupposed a Creator, was making great strides, mostly by using the scientific method, in all fields of study and even adding new fields. Natural Theology, the wedding of God to His Creation seems like a “no duh” if ever there was one. It was progressing nicely. Science gave us greater insights into the wonder of Creation.

Then Darwin came along. Darwin came along, and for one hundred- and fifty-years Science, and scientific pursuit of truth have been greatly hindered by his silly little theory, and those who have made a religion out of evolution are among the most ignorant people on the earth. So, the liberal theologian with the Ph. D is “messed up” and those who make evolution a religion are “ignorant”

What's a little bit tragic is how the Christians have let those people get into our heads. We have been told for so long by so many of The Culture that people who believe in creation are anti-Science. We should believe, they say, that there was an explosion, and all this just happened. Have you ever seen the aftermath of an explosion? And we don't hear much about Occam's Razor.

33. The “Jews who believed in Him” understood the implication of His talk about becoming free; He was saying that they were somehow not free. Noting that they are descended “from Abraham,” they protest to Him, that “οὐδενὶ δεδουλεύκαμεν πώποτε – we have never been in bondage ever.” That, of course, is not true, but is patently false. They were slaves in Egypt for 400 years.

Their tone at this point is not disrespectful or confrontational; they just take exception to what He is saying. At first glance we might note that people who have quite often been in subjection to other people, and who have seldom actually been self-governing, and who are even as they speak suffering occupation by Rome, have no reason to take umbrage at His saying what He says.

Barclay seems to have a good handle on what is going on here. He talks about the obvious falsehood of their claim to never have been in bondage, and then points out how

the Jews set a tremendous value on freedom which they held to be the birthright of every Jew. In the Law it was laid down that no Jew, however poor, must descend to the level of being a slave...Again and again Jewish rebellions flared up because

some fiery leader arose who insisted that the Jews could obey no earthly father because God was their only king.

He then quotes Josephus, who speaks of

Judas of Galilee, who led a famous revolt against the Romans: ‘They have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and they say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord’...And even if it was true that there had been times when they were subject to other nations...it was also true that even in servitude they maintained an independence of spirit which meant that they might be slaves in body but never in soul. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote of Joseph: ‘Joseph was sold to be a bond slave, yet he was free, all radiant in the nobility of his soul.’ Even to suggest to a Jew that he might be regarded as a slave was a deadly insult.

Their claim to have never been in bondage is expressed with the verb “δεδουλεύκαμεν,” a common verb – the cognate noun “slave” or “servant” is common as well – in the perfect tense. It means that that the claim of those who are saying this is that while their ancestors may have once been slaves, these particular people have never themselves been in bondage.

As a matter of fact, Josephus aside, it’s one thing to be occupied and subjected, and another thing to be enslaved. Portions of the Internet seem to question whether the Egypt experience was slavery, but it was. Later on, upon the destruction of Jerusalem, Titus took Jewish slaves back to Rome. In *Jewish Wars*, Josephus says that those slaves were used to build the Coliseum.

The Coliseum famously still stands in Rome. A ten-minute walk down the street, at the entrance to the Forum, you can walk through the Arch of Titus, built in 82 by his brother Domitian to commemorate victories, including his decisive defeat of the rebellious residents of Judea. Likely those same Jewish slaves and their descendants labored on that project as well.

Especially ironic is the inscription of that victory along with depictions carved in the stone of the loot being carried away from Jerusalem. Included in those carvings you see Menorahs and what looks like it may be the Ark of the Covenant. Were these carved by skilled and enslaved Jewish masons? If you’re the Romans, and you’re going to take slaves...

34. He surely got their attention, didn’t He? He does not correct them with talk of Egypt, which means that He understood their claim like I understand it. But Jesus is going somewhere with this, and He talks about a different kind of slavery, a kind much worse than physical bondage; spiritual bondage; bondage of the will. This would be a good time to talk about Luther’s writing on that.

Responding to their claim to never have been in bondage, “ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν – He answered, ‘truly, truly, I say to you,’” which seems to be an idiom. There are a lot

of ideas as to the meaning of that idiom, and I'll throw my hat into the ring. If you look at this phrase and similar phrases as used by Jesus, it means "you're not going to like this, but..."

Then He sort of tells them that they are sort of slaves, "ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν δοῦλός ἐστιν τῆς ἁμαρτίας – that anybody who does the sin is a slave to the sin." The verb is a present participle ("continuous habit or practice" WP), and the noun is singular, modified by the definite article. We talked about that last week. He is not talking about "sin" or "a sin," but about "the sin."

He says of that person that "he is a slave of the sin - τὴν ἁμαρτίαν δοῦλος ἐστιν." The meaning of all that is that whatever sin enslaves you, to that sin you are a slave. It sounds like He's talking about addiction, or do we think addiction is a modern phenomenon? To be sure, there are a lot more things we know of to be addicted to these days than those, but addiction is as old as the Fall.

What Vincent weighs in with seems plausible, and others comment along the same lines,

The definite article, the sin, shows that Jesus does not mean merely a simple act, but a life of sin. Compare [1 John 3:4-8](#), and doeth the truth ([John 3:21](#)); doeth the righteousness ([1 John 2:29](#)).

If what Barclay says and what the people he quotes say is true, then this spiritual bondage would be to the Jew even worse than physical bondage. Jesus has grown up with these people, He has practiced their religion, He knows it and them well, and seems to know exactly where He is going with this by talking about spiritual freedom, which is the opposite of spiritual slavery.

Note what Jesus the preacher has done here. He has talked about freedom, and they have talked about slavery. Now He points out that they are, in fact, in slavery to sin. By saying what He said in the that that He said it, He has created pathos in them, an emotional response; they, perhaps more than any other people on the face of the earth, abhor slavery to the very depths of their being.

They now take that same pathos into His talk about spiritual slavery, which is even worse than bondage of the body, and should therefore – because it is spiritual, not physical – be even more abhorred by them. We can do the same thing in our preaching. Make people feel what it might be like to be a slave. Even better still make they feel what it's like to be spiritually enslaved to sin.

35. Now He brings the concept of child into the conversation. The ancient household (οἰκία), was headed by a man, and was made up of two basic groups; you were either a family member or you were a slave or servant. The family members were more important than the slaves, and the son was the most important of the family members. See *Downton Abby* for the modern application.

Jesus here states the obvious; ὁ δὲ δοῦλος οὐ μένει ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα· ὁ υἱὸς μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα – the slave does not remain in the household forever, but the son remains in the household

forever.” The slave or servant can be moved out of one household and into another at any time, for any reason, and in fact slaves were bought, sold, and traded all the time in the Ancient World.

But no father buys and sells his own children, and especially not the heir, but instead his seed lives on in those very heirs that descend from him. In this way, he lives “forever,” except, of course, he doesn’t. At least not physically, but spiritually. So it is with the disciples of Jesus – Christians – who are children of God, not slaves, and who will remain in the household of God for eternity.

36. But He has good news for those who are slaves to sin; “ἐὰν οὖν ὁ Υἱὸς ὑμᾶς ἐλευθερώσῃ, ὅντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε – if therefore the Son should set you free, surely you will be free.” This is another conditional sentence, using the “if/then” format, with a cause and effect taking place. To accomplish this grammatical feat, He uses two conjunctions, ἐὰν – if” and “οὖν – therefore.”

The “therefore” bids us look at what we have just heard to inform our understanding of what we are about to hear. Using the Subjunctive mood, He assures the hearers that if, therefore, the Son should “ἐλευθερώσῃ - set you free,” then “ὅντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε – surely you will be free,” a future tense. We may be in slavery to sin here, or actually a slave, but in heaven we will be free.

I was looking at Pastor Martin Luther King’s famous speech, which ends with the proclamation, “free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I’m free at last.” Those words are taken from what we like to call a “Negro Spiritual,” and the song is talking about heaven. He was talking about freedom from Jim Crow for black people, but mostly he was talking about heaven for the Christian.

The adverb ὅντως – surely” is used to express that a thing actually and really is, as opposed to something that just seems to be, but it isn’t. For example, Paul uses it to talk about the “true” widows, as opposed to those who only appeared to be widows, but they were not. Here, the freeing that comes from Jesus brings a true and certain hope of heaven, where we will be free from sin.

The Son, He says, has authority to free the slave. Jesus is that Son, whose life, death, and Resurrection paid the ransom for many, and set us free from our bondage to sin, death, and Satan. The freedom that Jesus gives is valid and true. We remain in God’s household forever in heaven. That it is given by Him and not earned by us is fundamental to the certainty of our salvation.

Continuing to juxtapose bodily slavery with spiritual slavery, He seems here to be making the point that bodily freedom, denied to so many of the ancients, is not all that it’s cranked up to be. Even if you have bodily freedom, like most Americans, for example, if you are still in your sins, then you are still in spiritual bondage, which is actually far worse than the other kind of slavery.

Hymns

Sing Reformation Hymns on Reformation Sunday

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
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