

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today is the Festival of the Reformation. It's not what we would call a Biblical festival. Our texts don't commemorate a special Biblical event, like the great feast days of the church year. We're not remembering the birth of Christ or His baptism. We're not remembering Jesus death or resurrection or ascension.

We're not even remembering the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, although the liturgical colors are the same. In fact, this day's color is instructive, for it is connected up with the Holy Spirit. This is a day to think on the word, the Spirit's main instrument to work faith, as we confess: "Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news" (Augsburg Confession, V:2). Or as we say it in the Catechism: "the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith" (SC, Creed, Explanation to the Third Article).

To be sure, many will want to celebrate this Festival as an historical event in the life of the church. They will want to hear the stories of the Reformation, of Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the Castle Church door, of his "here I stand" moment before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, of the pretense of Luther's capture and confinement at the Wartburg Castle to protect his life, of Luther's return to Wittenberg to quell the iconoclasm of Karlstadt and his radical followers, etc.

But if I were to focus on that, I would be no better than the Roman Catholic priest, on the one hand, whose homily has been making the rounds — going viral as they say today, whose homily focused not on Christ and faith and life, but on politics and upon one particular candidate — an anti-endorsement for him, or than the Roman Catholic monsignor, on the other hand, who endorsed this same candidate, and whose ecclesiastical supervisor had to respond in a public letter. No, the purpose of the sermon is neither to give a history lesson nor to make a political endorsement. If you want to know my personal views, we can talk privately, but in this pulpit I speak for Christ, and political endorsements are unworthy of Him.

Rather, hear what Jesus says today: *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

Now, to be sure, what Jesus says to us from the Scriptures, we receive in our context. And so last week, as we heard Jesus say to us, *"render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,"* we talked about the government and our Christian relationship to that government. We talked about how Christians honor their government and the governing authorities God has given us; it's the right thing to do; there's an apostolic mandate to do this.

Let me use this same context for Jesus' words today, for we American Christians have the additional privilege of living in the United States, which was "conceived in Liberty," as President Lincoln described it—in freedom (Emancipation Proclamation). Our Declaration not only asserted our independence from England, but also our freedom. Men and women are endowed by God with certain rights, it said, "unalienable Rights" the founders called them, rights that cannot be taken away, including "life, LIBERTY, and the pursuit of happiness." The Declaration concludes: "These united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be FREE and Independent States." Our Constitution likewise with its Bill of Rights recognizes these freedoms: freedom of religion, freedom of speech and of the press, etc.

Truly, we consider freedom to be a precious commodity in our country. "Give me liberty or give me death," Patrick Henry exclaimed in a speech to the Virginia State Convention in 1775, so precious is this freedom — more precious even than life, Henry claimed.

But, in fact, these freedoms CAN be restricted or even curtailed — many peoples live in countries without these freedoms, and we see people trying to take away these very things today in our country. Churches and Christians are on the front lines. Governors and mayors and health care commissioners have sought to keep churches from gathering, supposedly because of the dangers of COVID on those unsuspecting victims who gather. Just this past week here in Indiana in St. Joseph County, where South Bend is, the health officer penned a letter to churches urging them to stop in-person gathering from now until March 2021. If not, the letter threatened, "we will ... be compelled to respond to any complaints we receive regarding safety concerns." Unthinkable.

Thanks be to God we have an Attorney General who will not stand for such targeting of churches. AG Hill's letter in response stated: "Unless you have actual evidence justifying the need to target churches for closure—*i.e.*, something other than the 'not conclusive' study your letter cites—I advise you to cease from threatening congregations who do not comply with your demands or *my* office [that is, the Attorney General's office] will be 'compelled to act.' The health and safety of Hoosiers citizens is compelling, but so is liberty." Now, there's a defender of liberty. I fired off an email to the person who will likely be our next AG urging the same kind of fidelity to our freedoms.

There are more examples of government officials trying to silence Christians for their Biblical beliefs, many of which are unpopular today, or force them to violate their deeply held beliefs. It's no wonder that a number of legal organizations have sprouted up in the last several decades to defend these

freedoms: Alliance Defending Freedom, The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, First Liberty Institute, and more.

Still, as precious as these freedoms are for Americans, we as Christians acknowledge a freedom that is not dependent on a defense by Attorneys General or legal non-profits. It's the freedom that Jesus spoke about, that comes from abiding in His word and from knowing the truth. It's a freedom from the yoke of the Law and from its condemnation. It's a freedom won by Christ, who died once for all, as St. Paul says: "*the death he died he died to sin, once for all*" (Rom. 6:10); His sacrifice was "*the propitiation ... for the sins of the whole world*" (1 John 2:2) — for all people, in all places, for all time. Again, St. Paul says, "*For freedom Christ has set us free*" (Gal. 5:1). The Son has set us free; therefore, we are "*free indeed,*" says Jesus. Moreover, the freedom we have as Christians is greater than the freedoms we enjoy as Americans, for it's not dependent on the law, but on Christ's promise, and it truly cannot be taken away.

Now don't misunderstand this freedom as some Americans do. This freedom is not a license to do whatever you want: a freedom without responsibility or consequence. Certainly our freedom is not a freedom to sin, for indulging sin is a re-enslavement, as Jesus taught: "*everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*" Making a practice of sin makes you "*of the devil*" (1 John 3:8). Remember what St. Paul taught? "*You are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin... or of obedience*" (Rom. 6:16). No, to indulge your flesh in shameless sinning would be to squander the freedom that Jesus won for you and would again put you under a legal taskmaster. Repent! For St. Paul says about your freedom, "*stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*" (Gal. 5:1), that is, "*do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh*" (Gal. 5:13), to "*gratify the desires of the flesh*" (Gal. 5:16), to do "*the works of the flesh*" (Gal. 5:19).

Yes, rather than sin, we have been freed by Christ and united with Him by baptism, flesh crucified with Him "*with its passions and desires*" that we might live by the Spirit and serve one another. St. Paul wrote, "*through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" (Gal. 5:13-14).

So this is part of the Reformation message to you today: you have been freed from your constant striving to fulfill the law and failing to live up to its exacting demands. You have been freed by Christ and His atoning sacrifice for sin, freed by God's grace alone and not by your striving, which always falls short of God's unfailing standard. As we heard in the Epistle: "*for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.*" Your freedom therefore is gift alone from God received by faith alone.

Which leads me to another part of the Reformation message, namely, faith. You heard how Jesus was preaching to *“the Jews who had believed him”* in our Gospel. They had come to believe because of Jesus’ preaching. He had been telling the people who He was — the Light of the world, where He came from — the Father’s side, where He will be going — back to the Father, what He is going to do — give them the light of life. *“As he was saying these things, many believed in him”* (John 8:30).

But believing in Jesus is not just about being converted; it’s about a life of faith. It’s not just about being baptized as a one-time event, but about remembering your baptism, drowning the Old Adam in you by daily contrition and repentance and arising to live before God in righteousness and purity. It’s about living in the freedom of faith, and that means abiding in Jesus’ word, partaking of it regularly, hearing it, eating it, drinking it. Then, *“you will know the truth”* — then you’ll know Jesus, who is the truth (John 14:6); then *“the Spirit of truth,”* who works by these means, *“will guide you into all the truth”* (John 16:13) — and this *“truth will set you free.”*

And this freedom is a freedom that is yours regardless your temporal circumstances, for it’s from the Son. It’s yours as you abide in Jesus’ word; so it has been throughout the years, for the followers of Christ were free in Jesus’ day, though they endured the yoke of Roman tyranny. Believers in Christ that lived a second-class life under the subjugation of their Muslim rulers were still free in Christ. Christians in the former Soviet Union were truly free, though they were prevented from expressing their faith openly. And regardless what happens in the years to come in America — the trends are not promising, but who knows? — nevertheless, we who believe in Jesus, who abide in His word, spoken, poured, eaten, and drunk, we are also truly His disciples, who know the truth and who are truly free.

O saints of God, come what may, we have been called to freedom in Christ. Be strengthened by word and Sacrament and live as Christ’s people, free and loving, hopeful and joyful. Blessed Reformation.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.