

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation
October 28-29, 2017
John 8:31-36

“Free Indeed!”

Earlier this month, I joined my fellow pastors, teachers, and Directors of Christian Education (DCE) from the Southeastern District (SED) at the all church workers conference in Williamsburg. This gathering of all ordained and commissioned church workers only happens every three years, and it was a wonderful gathering. We were blessed with beautiful fall weather and so one afternoon I went to Colonial Williamsburg to get outside and just enjoy walking up and down Duke of Gloucester Street, the pedestrian-only main thoroughfare of Colonial Williamsburg. Because it was a gorgeous autumn afternoon, there were lots of people coming and going – tour groups, school-age kids on field trips, families with young children. It was a picture-perfect day – and then I overheard someone say in a rather loud and irritated voice: “Hrumph! I’ve seen all this before.” That person obviously was not impressed with Colonial Williamsburg! Maybe there is a connection to be made between this comment and the Festival of the Reformation today. Every year on the last Sunday of October we dutifully observe this uniquely Lutheran celebration of our faith. But maybe you’re feeling like that disgruntled person that I overheard in Colonial Williamsburg: “Hrumph! I’ve seen all this before... I’ve heard all this before... It’s old news.” Even today as we celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, we may be tempted to become cynical and say, “Been there, done that.” Truth be told, we live in a pretty jaded and cynical time. There is growing disillusionment and distrust of institutions and authority across the board. Does it matter what someone who lived 500 years ago said or did? Does Luther have anything to say to us today? And the answer is a resounding yes! Luther’s struggle for the truth and authority of Scripture – for himself and for others, for the certainty of salvation in Jesus Christ – for himself and for others – this is something that does indeed speak to us today. Underneath that jaded and cynical facade of contemporary life are individuals who are desperately struggling for identity, purpose and meaning in their lives. Why am I here? Does my life matter? Does God exist and if He does, does He even care? As Luther did in his day, so we in our day point people to Jesus and his saving truth as He tells us: **“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed”** (John 8:36). Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel lesson form the basis of the sermon on this Reformation 500 Festival Sunday. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

“Free indeed...” From an American perspective, freedom is one of the most revered and prized aspects of our society. Our nation, like many others, was birthed in a struggle for freedom, so this is in our American DNA. And yet, how often do we take this freedom for granted? As bumper stickers remind us, “Freedom is not free.” We hear things like “I can do what I want. It’s a free country!” “You can’t tell me what to do. It’s a free country!” The question becomes what are we using our freedom for? Not just as citizens of this country, but as Christians whose freedom from sin, death, and eternal condemnation has been won for us through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. What was true in the New Testament era was still true 500 years ago at the time of Luther and is still true today. Paul’s words in today’s Epistle lesson stand for all time: **“There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith”** (Romans 3:22b-25a). Freedom is not free! It cost Jesus his very life. Will we use this blood-bought freedom for bickering, arguing and self-serving ends? Or will we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, **“look not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others”** (Philippians 2:4), even as Jesus did? In Christ Jesus, we have been set free *from* the chains of sin that bind and trap us in downward, deathward spiral. This is God’s gift to each one of us, received by faith. That freedom *from* the chains of sin and death leads to freedom *for* loving and serving our neighbor, even as Christ came to love and serve us. This is the purpose for which the Lord would have us use this sacred gift of freedom!

Much has changed in these 500 years since Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Or has it? Certainly there have been quantum leaps in science, medicine, technology, and a host of

other things. But some things have not changed over the centuries. At the recent SED church workers conference, our plenary speaker was Rev. Dr. Dean Nadasdy, president of the Minnesota South District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS). He outlined some similarities between the 16th century of Luther and our own 21st century. These similarities provide common needs in church and culture for Reformation truths that cut across the ages and speak to people of every time and place. Some of these similarities include: church as institution, seen then and now as hypocritical and phony; the struggle between truth and power; Biblical illiteracy – and this in an age when access to Scripture is unparalleled; Scripture compromised by tradition; binding consciences in matters of adiaphora, that is, things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. As Dr. Dean Nadasdy pointed out, some things have not changed over 500 years, but other things have changed. In some respects, we live in a world that Luther could not have imagined in his wildest dreams: a world where God and the Church are marginalized because both are seen as irrelevant; guilt before God because of sin is unconsidered or denied; religious and moral pluralism; phrases like “faith alone” and “Christ alone” have been replaced with “We don’t know” and “Many paths lead to God”; the Bible is revered as a holy book but is unread; Jesus is beloved as a teacher of love and founder of a world religion, but not as Savior; a sense of entitlement that is everywhere. Are we willing to take a laser-sharp look at faith and church today and, following Luther’s own example, call for and lead reform where reform is needed? Or is our concept of reform limited to what God did through Luther, locked in the 16th century? If any group within world-wide Christianity ought to understand the need for reforming church, it should be us, the spiritual sons and daughters of Luther and the Reformation! “Free indeed” means that we do not make an idol of the past. We respect and honor that heritage, but we are listening intently to what the Spirit is saying to the churches today (Revelation 1:7).

In this Reformation 500 anniversary year, when millions of people from around the world are traveling to the little German town of Wittenberg, the epicenter of the Reformation, “the area around the Protestant mecca [Wittenberg] has recently made headlines as ‘the most godless’ place on the planet. According to a 2012 study by social scientists from the University of Chicago, east Germany is home to the highest percentage of atheists in the world, with just 8 percent of its population claiming to believe in God. Churches here are being sold off at such a blistering pace and so many devotees are dying off each year that Christianity is actually expected to become a minority religion in Germany in the next 20 years” (*The Washington Post*, June 25, 2017: “Where Luther is a name brand,” by Eliot Stein, p. F4). At the *stadtkirche*, the Town Church in Wittenberg (St. Mary’s), Rev. Johannes Block, is the head pastor in this church where Luther himself regularly preached. Pastor Block said this: “I think that, in the past, Wittenbergers lived with the Reformation, but now some live off of the Reformation” (Ibid). Perhaps we, too, have been all too content to “live off of the Reformation.” That sobering statistic about so little faith in the land of Luther is being mirrored here at home where on average only 18-20% of the population in worship on any given Sunday. Researchers all agree that the fastest growing faith segment of the population is the “nones,” those who claim no faith affiliation at all, and they are nearly 25% of people in America. If we are free indeed, if this is the lay of the land before us today, what will we use this God-given freedom for?

In these uncertain and challenging times, we may be tempted to wring our hands and say, “I wish we could turn back the clock!” But **“the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress”** (Psalm 46:11). Because we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone, made known in holy Scripture alone, we have confidence and hope. The mission field is before us! Because we are free indeed through the cleansing blood of Jesus, let us use the blessing of this freedom to be in mission – Christ’s mission – to the world. Let us celebrate this Reformation 500 anniversary with a renewed commitment to proclaim with our lips and with our lives that Jesus Christ is Lord and that He has laid down his life for all people. This is the sacrifice of love that we are all about as Christ’s people and Luther’s heirs. To give of ourselves, our time, our resources; to serve as the hands, feet, and mouth of Jesus in response to his saving grace and for the sake of his mission, this is what it means to be free indeed. Here I stand – here we stand! We can do no other. God help us! Amen.