

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and our liberator, Jesus Christ,
amen.

I watch a fair amount of news on television and read news articles from Associated Press, Reuters, and other news sources from the internet. I try to stay up to date on what's happening... Lately I'm hearing and reading more and more about freedom and our rights as Americans under the Constitution. We have the right to freedom of speech, however when an NBA General Manager exercised his right to support the protestors in Hong Kong he was excoriated in the media and probably wishes he'd kept his mouth shut. We have candidates running for President of the United States who are guaranteeing they will come and confiscate legally owned firearms of law-abiding American Citizens. This week I read a survey where 40 % of people under the age of 30 believe the 1st Amendment goes too far and there should be jail time for people guilty of "Hate" speech. Of course, the obvious problem here is, who decides what constitutes "Hate" speech... Politicians would love to help us out in that area, I'm sure...

Jesus wasn't a politician, but he was very political, some would say too political. He had a lot to say about things like taxes, how his followers should live under their government, and about human rights. Jesus was very concerned about our freedom. It might surprise some people, but Jesus was not a Democrat, nor was he a Republican. If there ever were such a thing, he would be a member of the

Love Party and if Jesus were ever to be elected President, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't last long before impeachment allegations and inquiries would begin. I say that because Jesus was quite the rebel for his day. He believed the Law was made for people and that people were not made to be slaves to the Law.

Remember how he healed the sick, exercised demons, and even raised people from the dead on the Sabbath? Then there was the time he was called out for allowing his disciples to eat without the ritual washing of their hands as proscribed by the Law... All those actions were technically against the Law and in today's language would be considered High Crimes and Misdemeanors. His opponents even tried to catch him in treason by asking about paying taxes to the evil Roman government to which, Jesus replied "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's."

Even though it seems some of our freedoms are under assault lately, I have to keep reminding myself that our freedom isn't granted by the laws of our local, state or even federal government. Nor are they given to us by the words our founding fathers wrote on paper and signed into law at the Constitutional Congress of 1787. When Jesus spoke of freedom, he was transcending politics and governments, then and now, to speak of freedom from the bondage to sin and death. He was pointing to himself as the one who would do the liberating. Don't miss how radical this is! Jesus isn't introducing a new confession or dogma. He

doesn't have a new amendment to the Torah or to the Constitution, he's not endorsing a candidate for office. He is offering himself as the only way to be truly free. Then and now, we have trouble accepting what he offers. As much as we like the sound of freedom, we're people who choose to imprison ourselves. We hold grudges, letting our hearts grow hard rather than handing all of our difficult situations over to God. We choose to bind ourselves to debt... or bitterness... or greed... or any number of self-imposed prison cells. We judge prematurely rather than using the God-given patience of Job to wait for the rest of the story. Even though we are people of grace alone - word alone - faith alone, the works righteousness of our Monday-Saturday creeps into our Sunday instead of the other way around. To emphasize and celebrate Jesus setting us free is to admit we can't set ourselves free. It means we must admit we need Jesus and that's difficult even though we know it's true.

I wonder what our reaction to Jesus would be today if He came and spoke these words from our Gospel reading on the streets of the good ol' USA. What if Jesus were speaking to Americans who had believed in him and he said to them, "If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you." I imagine Americans, in almost any city or town across the country replying to Jesus something like this... "What do you mean the truth will set us free? We live in

the land of the free and the home of the brave! We haven't been slaves to anyone since the revolution!"

The thing is, Jesus isn't talking about freedom under the Law. He's talking about a much higher form of freedom. Freedom under the Law is granted by humans and or human institutions. This kind of freedom always has limits and we all regularly break them. The kind of freedom Jesus brings is above and beyond the Laws of mankind. Jesus says everyone who sins (and that's every one of us) is a slave to sin and as a slave we can no more break ourselves free than if we were literally bound with rope and chains to the unholy trinity of Sin, Death, and the Devil. Sin isn't just what we do; sinners are who we are. Paul said it in our second lesson this morning. "All have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God." When we come to this place, we come to confess our guilt and to receive pardon. It's like an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting: Hi, I'm Pastor Mel and I'm a sinner... The difference is when we come to this place we leave totally forgiven. We have the words of eternal life and we have the gifts of Jesus very Body and His Blood that we receive in His Holy Sacrament. Jesus has broken the chains that bind you to that unholy trinity and that's the truth! That's the truth that truly sets you free.

How does it feel to be that free? Do you feel liberated like the French must have felt when they were liberated at the end of WWII? How about like the Jews locked up in the concentration camps when they first saw the American troops

coming to knock down the fences that kept them held captive? I can only speak for myself, but when I experience the fullness of the Words of Institution where Jesus promises me his body and blood are broken and shed for me, I literally feel the weight of my sin lifted off my shoulders and I get just a little bit giddy inside. It really makes me want to shout... Maybe it's that sip of wine, but I feel prepared to face whatever the world, or the devil throws my way, at least for a little while... After all, I'm only human. So, I return as often as I can to this font and this altar where I know my sins are forgiven and I experience my Lord's love and Grace.

Today we remember and celebrate the Reformation of the Church. It's totally appropriate we should get back to our roots at least once a year. What are our roots? Where exactly do we come from? Our roots grow deeper than the civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. who helped our country right the wrongs of our past history of slavery. Our roots grow deeper even than the founding fathers of our country who put so many freedoms into the laws of our land. They grow even deeper than our beloved Doctor Martin Luther who reminded the Church of his day we are justified, saved, and set free by Grace alone through faith alone. Our roots grow all the way back to Jesus Christ our Lord who is the foundation and perfecter of our faith. Jesus Christ is the truth whose blood set us free and continues to set us free every time we receive him.

May the Church of Jesus Christ always continue to be reforming. May we, as His representatives here at Trinity Lutheran Church in Pittsburg Ohio, also always be reforming into the likeness of our lord and our savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we live, serve and have our very being, amen.