

Sermon – John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28
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Grace Lutheran Church
Reformation
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“Forgiven and Free”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I don't often fly, but when I do it feels like freedom. Beyond the freedom of leaving home for a few days, or the freedom of escaping gravity's pull, what I experience is the freedom felt by the person seated next to me. There seems to be no freedom quite as strong as that felt by a stranger seated on a plane next to a pastor. They'll tell me anything. When my neighbor discovers that I'm a man of the cloth, all bets are off. Sometimes I hear confessions, at other times, accusations; on other flights, people share stories of deep hurt and pain. Whatever the case, I listen with a kind ear and an open heart, knowing that many people assume Christians will be judgmental or harsh. Many people I encounter in this situation are lapsed or lacking in their worship attendance. They often express an odd combination of guilt and defiance. Perhaps they should be going to worship; on the other hand, they're good people. Do they really need what the church has to offer?
2. So goes the game of self-justification. I'm not alone in my airplane conversations. The late Luther scholar and pastor Timothy Lull tells of a conversation he had with a young man on a transcontinental flight. Upon learning of Lull's vocation, the young man expounded upon the folly of the Reformation, and the church in general. "No one," the young man exclaimed, "is seeking a god these days, gracious or otherwise." Lull goes on to tell how his seatmate spoke of the many ways he didn't need God. After all, he had a

great career, a sizable income, great eating habits, and an impressive exercise regimen. The irony of the conversation was not lost on Dr. Lull, who notes: “This young man began the conversation by holding forth about the uselessness of the article of justification, and here spent the last twenty minutes justifying himself about his successes, his money, his physical fitness, to me, a total stranger.” We are always trying to justify ourselves before God, whether we believe in God or not, for we are all captive to the lie of our own freedom, the belief that we can and must create meaning and purpose for our lives. In the process, we bind ourselves to things that can never truly satisfy: career, wealth, fitness, whatever. All of these can be good, but none of them is God. None of them can set us free.

3. Like the freedom we feel on an airplane, it’s an illusion. After all, there are few situations in which we are less free than when we’re strapped into a giant metal tube over which we have no control thousands of feet above the earth’s surface. So, too, do we travel through this world, moving and shaking – we’re going places! – but are all the while strapped in, bound, by forces over which we have no control, the forces of sin and our own mortality. Jesus lays bare this truth in our gospel reading today. He turns to those who have been following him, inviting them to continue to follow in his Word and thereby find truth and freedom. Freedom? Why would they need that? They’re children of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone! Oh, the lies we tell ourselves. To be descended from Abraham meant slavery and oppression at every turn. From the Egyptians and the Babylonians down to the Greeks and now the Romans, the people of Israel were hardly ever free. But so insistent are we in our self-determination that we tell ourselves the lie until we believe it. We are free, we cry, all the while hurtling through space bound by forces we cannot master.
4. The truth of the matter is that we are bound by sin. By sins known and unknown, things done and left undone, things we’ve done to others and

things others have done to us. Pretend as we might, sin is real. Try as we might, we cannot free ourselves. Paul, making his closing argument in the case against all humanity, sums it up in his letter to the church in Rome: No human being will be justified in God's sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. Keeping the law is good, of course, but even if we were able to do it, it would not be enough, for the law was not designed to make us acceptable in God's sight. The fact that we have failed miserably to keep the commandments only makes matters worse. To whom then shall we turn?

5. If we'd be quiet about how free we think we are, we'd see that Jesus has already told us. It's him, standing right in front of us. Continue in my Word, Jesus invites. These are not merely the words of Jesus, the things he says. For he himself is the Word of God, the One through whom God speaks creation into existence. He is the Word, and he is the way into the truth of God and the life God desires for God's people. Jesus speaks to us today, proclaiming that freedom isn't the lie that we get to do whatever we want. Freedom is knowing in faith that we are justified not by doing what we want but by what Jesus has done for us. Freedom is forgiveness and the life that opens up when we let go of our lies and cling instead to Christ. Pastor James Honig writes, the gospel gives "freedom to participate in the life of God, freedom to experience the unconditional love and grace of God. All of it ultimately means freedom to live not for ourselves but for God and neighbor." We have bound ourselves in sin, contorted our lives pursuing meaning in all the wrong places, been beset by forces that swirl around us. But with one simple Word, himself, Jesus sets us free.
6. As the world was falling apart all around him, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of a time when God would make a new covenant with the people, a covenant that would be written on their hearts. We celebrate this new covenant today, the covenant sealed in the blood of Christ, which was shed for the forgiveness

of sin, the cup that is filled with the gift of life for you and for all people. The prophet's promise of a new covenant was fulfilled on the cross when the Word of God incarnate gave his life to save and redeem our lives. The grave would not hold him, however. Resurrection freed Jesus from the tomb and he is now running rampant through the world, inviting us to join him. He frees us from sin, death, and evil. He ends the lie that we can or must justify ourselves. Christ gives us grace and mercy; we cling to him in faith.

7. Today, we mark the 505th anniversary of the onset of the Protestant Reformation by remembering that what we need has not much changed as the centuries have passed. We will always need what the church has to offer, so long as the church is offering the gospel. We need to give up the lies we tell ourselves. We need forgiveness. We need hope in the face of death. Coming before God this day with empty hands and faithful hope, we receive what God is always giving us. Forgiveness of sins and lives of faith marked by loving service of one another. You who were bound are released. You who were dead are alive. Continue to Christ, and you will be free indeed. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.