

“A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all.”

Martin Luther’s enduring words from his famous essay, “On the Freedom of the Christian” provide us guidance in how we are to live as Christians in all times and places. Especially in the climate of division, violent words, prejudice, injustice, and overwhelm we are experiencing in our country, we need some guidance provided to us, on how to live and serve and love our Creator God in the midst of it. Luther’s words are a testament that the truth we find in Jesus Christ will set us free, no matter the time and place. Even these reflections that were written 500 years ago by a deeply flawed yet faithful man still hold true for us today, and give us some concrete reality of how to live into the Christian life and calling.

I look around and read and listen to the persistent messages we are subject to these days, and the division and vitriol and accusations and aggressive dismissals of people that plague our everyday existence honestly break my heart. What we are dealing with goes beyond any sort of political situation or affiliation, it’s not about that. It’s about God, and neighbors. How did we get so far away from seeing one another as people, as neighbors, as our siblings in Christ? Have we ever truly seen all people as the fellow humans they are? How can we rise up from this pit we have fallen into? And more importantly, how can we repent and do better in the future?

I find Reformation Sunday to be the perfect day to talk about this because the Reformation began as a way to right the wrongs persistent in the Church. Martin Luther did not initially want to break away from the Roman Catholic Church, but the dysfunction and harm ran so deep, and his reforms so rejected, that he formed a new Church. Our roots as Lutherans come from recognizing ill treatment of people by the establishment and creating new life in the church and in the life of faith instead. And I think we need some of that recognition now - recognition of the ills and harms in our life, and how we can build forth and create new life going forward.

The way we can build this new life starting right now, today, and carry with us in the future, is to be reminded of the importance of our faith.

One of the major themes both in today's Romans text and in Lutheran theology is the idea that we are saved by grace through faith. Faith is the key part here. Our works are not what buy us favor with God - God doesn't work like that. God rejoices in our faith, in our relationship with God. God recognizes that we are captive to sin in many ways - that we intentionally and unintentionally do things that harm one another, God's creation, the world around us, even ourselves. It's up to us to also have that recognition of sin, and instead of turn to hatred or vitriol or negative actions, confess what we've done, and turn to faith that in God all things are possible. In Jesus all things are made right and new. In the Holy Spirit we are empowered with gifts to do better next time, both in our relationship with God and in our relationship with our neighbors. Sin is part of our reality, yes. But the good news that comes with Jesus Christ is that we are not forced to be bound or captive by sin - we are FREE from that power of sin and death in our world. It is our faith which incites that freedom within us, freely given by God, in ways so incomprehensible and beautiful that it is hard to realize sometimes. God continues to forgive us, love us, choose us, to be our God, even in the midst of all the negativity and hatred that we may intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate in our current circumstances.

Our freedom in God, though, is not a free pass from responsibility to God or neighbors. We do still have a calling and a commitment to the people around us and the God who created every single one of us in God's image. Jesus actively includes all people, even THOSE people, whoever they might have been in a particular circumstance - tax collectors, Samaritans, prostitutes, Gentiles, people who were chronically ill or had disabilities or were fighting their own demons - and calls us to do the same. Loving your neighbor includes the neighbors that you may not agree with, who look different from you, who love differently from you, or have a different background or upbringing than you. Difference is not a reason for excluding people from neighborly, Christ-commanded love. We are called to give this

love to all people. And we must love one another as we love the people who are like us too.

So how do we love our neighbors? What does our faith tell us about loving our neighbors?

Both of the statements from Luther are equally true - that we, as Christians, are both utterly free and also dutiful, servant of all. We cannot rely only on one statement, both of them are part of our reality as Christians. Yes we are made free in Jesus Christ, the Son who sets us free indeed. And we are also in service and have a duty to all our other fellow free people in the name of Christ Jesus.

Seeing the pain and hardship and challenges of people who are different from us can be uncomfortable, it can be frustrating, it can be eye-opening, heartbreaking and mind-blowing simultaneously. But we cannot ignore it. We cannot ignore our neighbors because we have a duty to serve them in the name of Jesus. We cannot turn a blind eye to dysfunction and injustice and discrimination because the Savior we worship every single day calls us to love each other and love requires a relationship. It's in our roots as the Lutheran church - where there is wrongdoing we bring forth new life in the name of Jesus Christ. We rebuke the forces that defy God, just like our confirmands did to affirm their faith in the God of all time and place too. And it's up to us to bring the kingdom of heaven closer, in real and practical ways, in the decisions we make, in the things we teach our families, and in the ways we show up for our neighbors.

Dear friends, our calling as followers of Jesus is much greater than any political system or situation. We are called to welcome people in. We are called to build a bigger table. We are called to reach out to the person next to us, differences and all, and say hey, let's sit down and have some bread and fish or bread and wine together and share in each other's company. Let's be human together. Jesus dined with all kinds of people, regardless of any sorts of qualifiers because the good news and the new life in Jesus are for ALL people. We are called to see our neighbors as human, and follow

Jesus in this way of living. In our loving our neighbor and God in all things, we truly find freedom from any worldly thing, any sinful threat, any season of strife or hate. In belonging to each other and yet being free to serve in the name of God, we find new life and hope every day. In Christ, we are free indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.