

“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” 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.

Today we are celebrating and affirming our faith in many ways, in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We affirm our faith in the Triune God, expressed in our Lutheran tradition, on this Reformation Sunday, remembering the origins of this beautiful faith. We join with our faithful young people as they affirm their faith in God through the affirmation of baptism, their Confirmation celebration today. And we affirm the physical actions we take, the deeds with which we freely serve God and neighbor, in sharing our intents to financially give and support the mission and ministries of this church. There is great joy and great freedom to be found in such a day filled with affirmation and faith, given to us by God.

One of the major themes both in today's Romans text and in Lutheran theology as a whole is the idea that we are saved by grace through faith. Faith is the key part here. Our works or deeds are not what buy us favor with God - God doesn't work like that. God rejoices in our faith, in our relationship with God.

This idea was radical in Martin Luther's day, where the church had unlimited power and abused that power in the ways it took advantage of vulnerable people. And Martin Luther took issue with these unfair actions, which led to his reforming the church and creating the, as it's now known, Lutheran denomination. It was not an easy road by any means, but the freedom and love of God that came from these radical actions have indeed supported, sustained, and saved the lives of millions of people over time. May we also be so bold in the ways we act and impact the world around us.

God recognizes that we are captive to sin and struggle in many ways - that we intentionally and unintentionally do things that harm one another, God's creation, the world around us, through the systems we uphold, and even ourselves. It's up to us to also have that recognition of sin, and instead of turning 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.

And this call to serve, this acknowledgment of our freely-given, loving actions for one another, is the key part of living a Christian life that we affirm today. We have heard how giving and serving affirms our faith from members of our congregation over the past few weeks with our temple talks. We will soon hear important aspects of faith from our young people, of how they learn about God through the scriptures, and affirm their faith in the living, loving God. And now it is up to us to take these gifts of faith, this freedom and love, and use them for the sake of loving our neighbors.

Praise be to God, we are made free in Christ Jesus! We are made free to do these incredible works of love out of a genuine place of care and neighborly love, a sense of call given to us by Christ Jesus. We are not bound by our good works on earth in order to be forgiven or admitted into heaven. God's grace and forgiveness is free to all people, and nothing we do will ever separate us from that loving grace. Because of this freedom, not of our own doing but of Christ's doing, we are free to do good works in this world. We are free to love and serve God and our neighbors from a place of love and grace, not guilt or compulsion or assignment.

Knowing that we are God's people, and we are saved by grace through faith, we are free to do good things in this world! The scriptures teach us of these promises and encourage us to live in abundant love toward God and neighbor with this freedom. We are free to transform this world from the sin and darkness and negativity that threatens to hold us captive into the place where Christ's light shines brightly, where Christ's love is what holds us fast. Let's keep alive the tradition in which our early church was born, radically reforming what is harmful into what is life-giving. Let's transform our lives and the world around us that gives praise to God and loves our

neighbor deeply. Let's see the good that is in those neighbors, that life and light of Christ, and love one another radically, with fierceness, even in times of frustration. And let us give thanks and praise to God, who first loved us, who makes this freedom possible for us, every single day. Thanks be to God, Amen.