

Dependence Day

In the name of the Son who sets people free indeed, dear friends in Christ: We Americans value our civil freedom. It's in recognition of this that every year on the Fourth of July we celebrate our liberation from foreign domination on the holiday we appropriately call Independence Day. It was on that date in 1776 we officially declared these United States to be a free and sovereign nation, although it took several more years of brutal conflict and no small amount of bloodshed to make the declaration a reality. Since then we've fought wars and faced other challenges in order to preserve our civil liberty; but still, we mark July Fourth, Independence Day, as the day the nation's freedom that we so highly value began.

And if we value our civil freedom, we Christians who adhere to the Lutheran Confessions value even more our spiritual freedom. It is for this reason that every year around this time we commemorate the 16th century Reformation of the Church. We set October 31st (or the nearest Sunday before it) as the day of celebration, for on that date in 1517 Dr. Martin Luther first publicly challenged a number of unscriptural teachings and practices of the Western Church that were effectively enslaving the souls of men in an oppressive system of laws, tasks, duties, and obligations by which, they were told, they could earn for themselves merit in the sight of God and thus be forgiven the due penalties of their sins. That's when the movement we call the Reformation began. It took many decades of struggle, conflict, and bloodshed to bring it to fruition. But the reformers who often risked life, limb, and their personal liberty to do their work had a goal: it was to free souls from spiritual bondage and bring them to the full truth and freedom of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the process, the reformers established the three great solas of the Reformation, *sola* being the Latin word for alone or only. They are: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. And to unpack that a bit, when we say grace alone, we mean that it's only the unmerited favor of God who in love sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to live a perfect life on behalf of all people, and then to offer that life as the atoning sacrifice for sins – it's only *that* which saves us from sin, death, and everlasting damnation. We have no part to play in it, no task or duty to perform, no prerequisite worthiness to possess or to achieve. It's all done for us by Christ by God's grace. When we say faith alone we mean that the blessings of the Gospel, namely forgiveness, life, and salvation are ours only by believing what Christ has done. Again, there are no hoops to jump through, no steps to climb, no hidden costs tacked on afterward; anyone who hears the Gospel message of what Christ has done to save us and believes it has the very gifts the Gospel promises. Finally, when we say Scripture alone we mean that the only source of truth and authority in the Church is the inspired Word of God, and that no teachings or traditions of men however wise, pious, or good they may appear can be allowed to add to or subtract from what God has clearly revealed.

Grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone: it is upon these three mighty pillars that our spiritual freedom in Christ stands. So, while we call our celebration of national freedom Independence Day, it might be appropriate to call today's celebration Dependence Day because we recognize that it's on Christ and the three solas of the Reformation that our spiritual freedom depends.

This is precisely what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel lesson. He's in the Temple, speaking to a mixed group. Some believe in him, that he is the Christ; some of them

did believe at some point and now aren't quite sure; and some don't believe in him at all. None of them fully understands Jesus or his mission to save the world from sin. In that sense, all of them are works in progress. So he tells them, "If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

There are several things to emphasize here. First is the idea of abiding in or remaining in the Word of Jesus. That's the Scripture alone principle. It's not the words of Rabbi X, Pastor Y, or Pope Z you need to stick with. It's the Word of Jesus, who is the Word of God in flesh. It's abiding in his Word, constantly hearing and studying it, that makes you a disciple. And a disciple is by definition a student, one who is learning. If you ever get to the point when you think you've heard enough, that you've already got mastered what Jesus has to say in all his Word, well, then you're not his disciple anymore and you're on the path that leads away from his truth. No, we know that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. That's the means the Holy Spirit uses to create and sustain faith in us. If we are to be truly the disciples of Jesus, we need to keep hearing his words.

Moving on, those who are disciples of Jesus will know the truth. This is the grace alone principle. The divine truth revealed in all Scripture is the person and work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. Thus abiding in the Word we see over and over again that it's God's work, never ours, that saves. All our human efforts to save ourselves inevitably result in failure and forms of bondage; although it must be said that those who are in bondage often are not aware of it. More on that later. But the great truth revealed in all Scripture is God's grace for sinners in Jesus.

That is the truth which sets us free. This is the faith alone principle. Once we come to the knowledge of the truth of God's grace and forgiveness in Jesus who earned salvation for us by his suffering and death on the cross, we are free from thinking that there is something we must do to achieve salvation for ourselves. We're free from worrying if we've done enough, free from doubt that we've not done things well enough, free even of the fear of death, for Christ's resurrection means that we too will rise. Knowing the truth of the Gospel, simply believing it, is what sets us free from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

That is great news; news so great, in fact, that something in us wants to reject it out of hand. To be specific, the sinful nature in us resists and refuses to believe. Full of pride as it is, it wants to lay claim to some merit or worthiness, some part to play however small (though the bigger the better) by which we may contribute to our own salvation. That is to say, with regards to salvation we want to be to some degree *independent*. We want to do it ourselves if only a little bit, because then to some extent it's me and not the Lord that I get to depend on.

So it is that we see the Jews to whom Jesus spoke these words taking offense. "What do you mean, 'You will become free?' We're the offspring of Abraham! We have never been enslaved to anyone!" It's a statement remarkable in two ways. The first is the way it bursts with sinful pride. The popular belief among the Jews of Jesus' day was that they were better than all other people on the face of the planet. This was in part because of their ancestry. It was widely believed that God chose their forefather Abraham to be the heir of the covenant because of his superior righteousness. He was closer to God than anyone else, they thought, so naturally God chose him to be the one through whom he would bring the Savior into the world. And since Abraham our father was closer to God, so are we his descendants. On top of that, they were also the keepers of the Law God gave through Moses. God gave this Law to them and to no other people. And they were doing their best to adhere to it (or the letter of it anyway). Therefore they imagined that by right of birth and their careful keeping of the Law, they were good and upright in the eyes of the Lord. This is completely wrong, of course. The Law was

given so that they would see that they were sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness like everyone else; but they didn't see it. Their pride blinded them to the truth.

The second noteworthy thing about their statement of protest to Jesus is the absolute ignorance it displays. Even the most perfunctory reading of Scripture reveals that the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham, had a long history of being enslaved. Indeed, the times they could have been described as free were few and short-lived. When we first hear them called a nation, they're in bondage in Egypt. Their servitude is especially oppressive. It's the Lord in his mercy who frees them from that terrible slavery and takes them to the Promised Land. He conquers it for them and sets them up as a free and self-governing people under his own authority and protection. But almost immediately they turn from the Lord to worship other gods. So much for their inherent goodness. In response, to bring them back to himself, the Lord causes them to come under foreign domination again. Because his people will not depend on him, he takes away their freedom. When they wake up to what's going on and why and they cry out to the Lord for help, he rescues them, usually by raising up a deliverer who is in some way a prophetic foreshadow of Jesus – thus reinforcing the overall theme that salvation is God's work alone through his appointed Savior. And then the cycle repeats itself, over and over again. Only the names of the nations to whom Israel becomes enslaved changes. First it's Canaanites, then Moabites, Hittites, Midianites, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks ... indeed, it's hard to imagine that the Jews arguing with Jesus in the Temple had forgotten that even as they speak insisting that they're free, they are in subjugation to Roman control. The fact is that none of them have ever known what it is to be truly free in a civil sense.

And what's true in a purely civil sense, that they've never known freedom, is even truer in a spiritual sense – for as Jesus points out, anyone who sins is the slave of sin. That's the human problem for both Jew and Gentile alike. There is no difference. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And that's a good way to think of it: falling short. We normally think of sins as certain things we think, say, and do that are contrary to the Law of God. And while that's true in one sense, it leads us to think of our sins as specific incidents that can be enumerated: I did this wrong, I let my temper get away and spoke in anger to that guy, I had this lustful thought, and so on. And because we think this way, the solution to sin would seem to be to stop doing those things. But our sin problem is so much more than that. Sin is every thought, word, and action that falls short of God's absolute standard of perfect love. Seen this way, since nothing we do meets that standard, everything we do is sin. We imagine that there is at least some good in us. We're like a water glass part way filled with goodness. All we need is a little more to fill it to the brim and then we'll be all better. This is what has driven people throughout the ages to try to improve themselves with legalistic schemes and manmade traditions and overt acts of piety to raise the level in the glass. But it's a deceptive form of spiritual slavery – always trying to get better, and never quite making it. That's because when it comes to goodness, the glass is actually empty. There isn't any in us. And when we try to fill it with the good we can do, what we're adding is the blackest, foulest, sludge of sin which in our pride we imagine is pure and presentable to God. It isn't. What we need to do is turn the glass upside down. Confess everything in it for the sin it is. Dump it out. Receive Christ's forgiveness. And then let Jesus fill us with *his* grace and goodness. It all depends on him.

And that's exactly what he goes on to say. "The slave does not remain in the house forever." He means that those who rely on themselves and are on the endless and futile treadmill of working toward their own salvation – even in part – will eventually be cast out. Only those whom the Son sets free are free indeed, since the Son abides in the house forever.

This is why we remember the Reformation each year. We do it because we recognize the temptation to be in some way independent of God, to have a part to play in our own salvation, is ever with us and must be constantly suppressed, fought against, and defeated through confession. We do it because the need for Reformation always goes on. And we do it to remind ourselves to be true disciples of Jesus by abiding in his Word and taking our stand on the three great pillars: grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone, for on these our hope, our salvation, and our spiritual freedom depend. Therefore may our gracious God and Father grant to each of you, today and evermore, a happy and blessed Dependence Day. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!