

Reformation Sunday  
October 31, 2010  
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*Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36*

## **The Son Will Make You Free**

What do we preach today? We have a great variety of options that provides us a smorgasbord of theological and homiletical avenues. You may think this is a good thing; “pastor got it easy today, he can go any way he wants.” But in fact it makes it all the more difficult and complex to do the sermon. You see, we have a lectionary to follow. Not that we are irremediably tied to it with no chance to stray, but we have at least a theological calling to stay true to our texts. Our seminary professors tell us, “preach the text not the day.” But how to do that? We can’t escape the context in which we are. Here’s what I mean.

In our secular calendars, today happens to be Halloween. We could preach about the temptations provided to our children by a more and more secular society that has forgotten about the sacred to embrace the esoteric and the pagan. Very helpful and needed message this one. We do in fact need to remind our children and ourselves the need to sift through the chaff to find the good grain. Everything is indeed permissible, but not everything is fruitful. There would be good justification to go that route. In fact, I would imagine that a good portion of our more conservative brothers and sisters are occupying the pulpit today with that sort of message. “True Christians don’t do that” many preachers are probably saying. But you know what? That message is overly legalistic and judgmental. You’d be hard pressed to find that kind of oppressing language in the gospels. Jesus talked way much more about what we are called to than what we are to avoid. Yes, the law of God is helpful in giving us guidance and direction, but more likely the law will just accuse us and declare us guilty. We don’t attain salvation by fulfilling every single precept in the law and in fact to try to do that is to try to do for ourselves what Christ died on the cross for. Paul said very clearly, that we are justified by faith apart from observing the law (Romans 3:28). Again, a valid and needed option, but one that provides no hope. Let’s try something else.

What if we were to talk about the *Día de los muertos*? We would do justice to our Hispanic brothers and sisters’ cultural heritage. We would also use the opportunity to remember our loved ones who have gone before us. There is theological correctness in that kind of meditation as well. In our liturgical calendar we have in fact the celebration of All Saint’s day which happens to be tomorrow. The memories of those that have died along with Jesus’ resurrection give us the theological framework to speak of the hope and faith of our own resurrection and eternal life. Those that have died are not dead forever, but are expectant of the resurrection of which Jesus is the first fruit. Yes we can go that way, but then what would I do next Sunday when we actually celebrate All Saints

Sunday? So for the sake of not drying up my preaching well I'll keep that one for a week from today.

Next in line could be a second cultural option, the Oktoberfest. Now, that's a truly Lutheran celebration! If it's German it's got to be Lutheran, right? Besides, I love everything having to do with fall. The cool, crisp air, the beautiful turning colors of the leaves, and then of course the harvest celebration. Which, I think, is what Oktoberfest is mostly about. A thanksgiving celebration for the bounty of the harvest. A recognition of God's blessings obtained through the earth. I may now be stretching things a bit; I know, but it is certainly true that in all things God's providence is giving abundantly. That is a good theological background to build a message around the Oktoberfest celebration. If that's not enough, then there is all that beer. Did you know that most of the reformation theology was written with a mug of beer on hand? No wonder we love our church! Actually, I don't know that's a historical fact, but it's a comforting thought.

Finally, we got Reformation Day. Now, this is probably the one topic we all can agree on. After all it is on October 31<sup>st</sup>, the day in which Martin Luther nailed the 95 thesis in Wittenberg, when we remember the beginning of the reformation movement that eventually gave birth to our Lutheran church. As Lutherans there is no other celebration more important than this one. Now we are talking. This is indeed what we gathered for. That's the center and core of our gathering today. Isn't it?

We really need to be careful on this one, my brothers and sisters. I fear that too much emphasis on the reformation for the simple sake of it can take us on the wrong path. We may be tempted to preach about the greatness of the things that happened during the reformation. We may be tempted to feel too proud or too haughty of our theological background. We may be tempted to celebrate the grandness of our theological heritage. Worse of all, we may be tempted to celebrate a supposed superiority over other Christian traditions of the past or present. In the time of Jesus there were those who relied so much in their ancestry that they dismissed the idea of needing someone to make them free. We could almost make their words ours, "We are the theological descendants of Martin Luther, and have never been slaves to anyone! What do you mean by saying you will be made free." So you see, even preaching about the Reformation can get pretty dizzy. What should we preach about then? Once again, preach the text not the day.

Yes, we could preach the text. Yes, we could preach the Word of God. Yes, we could preach Christ. We don't need no festivals, or celebrations, or liturgical excuses for that. "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed," says our gospel reading for today. The fact is that we are in need of being liberated. The fact is that we can't do it by ourselves. In the end all of the 500 years of Lutheran theology fall miserably short when it comes to solving the ultimate problem of faith, our sinful nature. If anything at all, what our doctrine teaches us is that there's nothing we can do on our own. When Martin Luther was a monk he was constantly going to his confessor. He would go in and confess and do penance, only to have to come back again because he couldn't find the peace and freedom that his soul so much desired. He understood all too well the words of Jesus, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." And sin is not necessarily understood here as doing "bad things." Sin can be understood here as our inability to trust God. Sin can also be our desire to be self-sufficient. Sin is actually our attempt to secure our destiny in

our own terms, to try to do for ourselves what Christ did for us on the cross. So Martin Luther understood himself not only as a sinner, but also as incapable of doing any kind of work to satisfy that sin. Ultimately he was only able to feel free when he finally decided to leave it all in the hands of Jesus. Just as he understood the pervasiveness of sin, he also understood that “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

So now we have finally arrived at the true core of our celebration of the day. It’s not Halloween, or *Día de los Muertos*, or Oktoberfest, or even Reformation Day. None of that has the power to gather us as the death and resurrection of Christ does. The only reason we are here today is because we know all too well our sinful nature. The only reason we are here today is because we realize we are being enslaved by sin. The only reason we are here today is because we realize that only Christ can set us free of that bondage. The only reason we are here today is because we know we need of Christ’s body and blood in order to be truly forgiven and free. “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” That’s truly something we can preach about on this day and on every day of our lives. Amen.