

Lectionary A October 26, 2014, Reformation Sunday
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville IN
Roberta Meyer

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

Dancing Free!

A California woman, Susan Marie Mellen served 17 years in prison for a crime she didn't commit. On Friday, October 10, 2014 she was finally released. Although facts were stacked against her, Ms Mellen never gave up hope that one day the truth would come out and she would be free. She said she even wrote "freedom" on her shoes, because she knew one day she would walk free.

"I'm a free woman now. Let me do the running man," she said, taking a few dance steps before speaking to the media.¹

I imagine this is how Martin Luther felt when he discovered the words we read in John? "...*you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*"² You see he felt the hopelessness of being in his own prison of sin. Ever since he promised God he'd be monk if he was saved from a pretty scary thunder storm, he had been trying hard to be a good monk. The problem was it just wasn't working. No matter what he did he was very aware that he was haunted by sin and couldn't get away from it. He confessed so much the confession- listening priest told him to stop. It was wearing everyone out. Martin would torture himself as punishment, he would deprive himself of food, just to make amends for the sin that infected his life. He followed all the rules and laws set up by the church. Nothing worked. He knew he was lost in sin.

Then in his scripture studies he read Romans 3. Maybe he was pulled to this scripture because it started out describing exactly how he felt. The Message Bible didn't exist then, but something tells me, Martin would have understood exactly what it said. "*It's clear enough, isn't it, that we're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else?*"³

Martin Luther got it that we were all a sorry bunch of losers. He got it that try as he may, he couldn't make it right with God. He made himself and everyone around him miserable. What he wanted desperately was to live a sin-free life, but the more he tried, the worse it got. He was a slave to sin in every sense of the word.

¹ <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonvingiano/a-59-year-old-woman-has-been-exonerated-after-17-years-in-pr>

² NRSV

³ The Message Bible

Then the truth started sinking in. The Romans text goes on: *Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners... and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.*⁴

God got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. You don't have to keep banging yourself in the head, Martin. Jesus has paid your sin debt. God knows you aren't perfect, and loves you just the way you are. What an "Ah-Ha" moment. That heavy stinky load of sin he was carrying around, just melted away. Can you imagine how free he felt? Maybe he danced a little jig, too.

Talk about reformation. The truth that set Martin Luther free was the beginning of his reformation. Everything he lived for changed. He no longer had to be focused on himself and how in the world he was going to be good enough to make God happy. Now he could boldly spread this good news and even tackle letting the church know. This put him in physical danger, but that didn't seem to bother him so much. He had just been given a free ticket to the kingdom of God, what's a little death threat here and there compared to eternal life?

How does this truth Martin Luther proclaimed affect us? How does knowing there is nothing we can do to save ourselves free us? Let's look at the text from our Gospel. Here Jesus is telling the religious leaders that "the truth will set them free." However, they respond, "Free, what are you talking about? They didn't like the implication that they were not free, so they declared that they didn't need Jesus' freedom because – apparently forgetting about the whole Egypt-thing – they have never been slaves.

They can handle things themselves. That's a pretty human thing to do. Thinking we are autonomous, we can save ourselves. But how does that work for us? I can tell you it doesn't work for me. When I get all stuck on my own abilities to make me a good person, well, I pretty much end up like Martin Luther, driving myself and everyone around me crazy.

Let's talk about sin for a moment. You see, when we talk about sin, it's almost always in the plural – *sins* – describing bad things we've done. That's the mistake Martin Luther made. Focusing on things he did. But sin described in the Bible, especially in the books Paul wrote is not so much a *thing* as it is a *force* – the power that seeks to rob the children of God of abundant life – and a *condition* in which we are trapped. Looking at it like this, the condition of sin is a state of insecurity – being fearful or anxious that you are not safe, not sufficient, not worthy of love and respect. Being separate from God.⁵

So what's the big deal about these two differences? Well, there are only two things we can do about sins, those things we do wrong: punish them or forgive them. Either way we risk leaving the person involved unchanged – that is, stuck in the condition of sin – unless you also deal with the underlying state of insecurity. And there's only one way to deal with insecurity, and that's love. Love creates a whole person no longer plagued by insecurity.

⁴ The Message Bible

⁵ Lose, David

I work with some extremely insecure teenagers in the afterschool program I direct at Heritage Hills High School. These kids are very good at sins, things they do wrong, and they are used to getting punished. In fact, all I have to do is call out one of their names and the first response I get is, "Am I in trouble? What did I do wrong?" They are plagued with the constant state of insecurity, sin. That's why we have that program. Our goal is to shower them with love. We help them with their homework. We cook meals together. We go on field trips. We celebrate their birthdays. One young man told me one evening as we were chopping vegetables together, that no one loved him unconditionally. That gave me a pain in my heart. I hope and pray that if I do nothing else working with those young people, that I can help them see that they are loved, by me and my staff and by God.

That is what God does for us. And that is the truth Martin Luther found that started a reformation. In God's kingdom, we are accepted not because of what we've done or acquired or accomplished, but simply because God loves us. Our identity isn't some hard earned award but rather a sheer gift of grace. And our destiny is secured not by our own merit or achievements. No, our future is secured and guaranteed by Jesus Christ, who died on a cross and was raised again, proving once and for all that God's love is more powerful even than sin and death.

So how about it? Let go of that two-year-old mentality of "I can do it myself" and jump into God's loving arms. Feel those shackles of the state of sin fall away. Safe in God's unconditional Love, we are re-formed into secure Love-bearing witnesses for God's Kingdom. Let's remember this as we write our prayers today. We are free to boldly ask for God's mercy to reach out to all for whom we pray. And while we are at it, let's kick up our heels and dance with joy, because, like Jesus says, "*If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed!*"⁶

Amen

⁶ John 8:36 NRSV