

Reformation Sunday – 2025
Revelation 14:6-7
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

King Theoden looked diseased. He had aged unnaturally. Theoden was under a spell. Grima Wormtongue, an unholy man who looks like his name, spewed poison into the ears of the king and Theoden was rendered a slave. This is a vivid scene from the Lord of the Rings saga. Gandalf the wizard had come to liberate the ruler of Rohan. Wormtongue, at the controls of the king's mind, is engaged in subterfuge. Gandalf is accustomed to a warm greeting, but the air is icy as he strides into Rohan's throne room. "The courtesy of your hall has somewhat lessened of late, Theoden King." The remark is precise. Theoden, at the behest of Wormtongue replies, "Why should I welcome you, Gandalf Stormcrow?" Wormtongue continues the assault: "Late is the hour in which this conjurer chooses to appear. Ill news is an ill guest." Gandalf is the epitome of wisdom, fortitude, and compassion. Wormtongue is not going to stop Gandalf's quest to help his friend. "Too long have you sat in the shadows. Hearken to me! I release you from this spell." There is an unseen squatter in Theoden's soul. Now this power behind Wormtongue gives voice to his presence. It is Saruman. Through Theoden, he says to Gandalf: "You have no power here, Gandalf the Grey." Ah, but he does. He is Gandalf the White. "I will draw you, Saruman, like poison is drawn from a wound." Saruman is determined to stay. "If I go, Theoden dies." Finally, Saruman is evicted, Theoden's face regains its youthful radiance and his mind returns to sanity.

That is the Reformation. That is a wonderful illustration of the Reformation. The church, King Theoden in this illustration, was held captive by lies, held captive by a works-righteous worm-tongue, by the Roman Catholic purveyors of false doctrine. Grace; it did not receive a warm welcome in the halls of Rome. "The courtesy of your hall has somewhat lessened of late, Leo X, pope." Luther brought grace into the halls of Christ's church and the welcome was icy. He was called a conjurer of teachings that defied the holy Roman church. No; Luther knew that the church had sat too long in the shadows of heresy. Hearken to me. Luther lifted his voice to liberate the long-suffering from the burden of earning their salvation. Luther lifted up the Gospel in all its beauty, all its power, all its truthfulness. Christ's merit had long been relegated to the dusty corners of His church. The Gospel itself was the strength of the Reformation. The Word itself is what draws works-righteous poison from the spiritual wounds of men's minds. Luther was threatened: "If the church and her doctrine is assaulted by the likes of you then the church will die." What a lie! What an outrageous lie! We live by the Gospel. The Church lives by grace. There is no life outside the truth, outside of Christ's sacrifice, outside of grace, outside of the Scripture.

Jesus pressed home His point to His audience. He was tethering freedom to Himself, tethering truth to Himself. Sola Christus – Christ alone; the weight of that reality comes from Jesus Himself, Jesus and His preaching. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31). Ironically, He said this to the Jews who had *believed* Him. But on this particular day these particular people weren't having any of it. Their response is comical. Comical because they assert something that is laughably untrue. "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone" (John 8:33).

Held in bondage in Egypt, held as captives in Babylon, and held prisoner in their own country by Rome, the Israelites had a *serial set of masters*. Why would they assert such a thing – that they had never been enslaved to anyone? Pride; it is a matter of shame to admit that one is a slave and those men would have none of it. It gets worse.

Jesus exposed the extent of their slavery. It is, without question, to be something that you recognize, this slavery. Freedom comes one way and only one way. “Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34-35). A slave to sin – that’s me. Slave to sin; slave to death; who will deliver me? It’s not the well who need a physician but the sick. Likewise, it’s not the free who need a Liberator, but a slave. Imagine the most diseased individual, one who hacks and wheezes and sweats while sitting still. Imagine a ripe jaundice color that is deeply embedded in his skin, open sores around his face and neck. Imagine such a fellow testifying to you that he is the picture of health. He avoids the medicine of immortality because of pride, because he will not admit that he is sick because to make such an admission is weakness. Now listen again: “...everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

We put our needs above others – we are slaves to sin. We minimize our transgressions and maximize others – we are slaves to sin. We love God but not enough to keep His commandments when the alternative suits us better – we are slaves to sin. The only free man that there has ever been is the only one who can liberate us. Jesus was, and is, true God and true man. Holy, just, loving and divinely good – He dwelled among us as a servant. He bore our sicknesses, our slavery, and our death. The One free man holds out freedom for anyone and everyone. Come to Me, says the Son, the Son who remains in the house forever. His blood is a gift that sets men free. His cross is a liberating key that unshackles us from guilt and shame, from sin and death. At the time of the Reformation, Luther saw that humanity was sick with sin and that the church of Rome was prescribing vials of disease laden fluids posing as medicine – and he nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg. Only the Son sets us free. Luther saw that humanity was chained to death and that Rome was directing sinners to their own righteous acts for deliverance which supremely compounded the problem – and he nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1).

Forgiven! That is freedom. It isn’t political. It’s more, it’s grander, it’s eternal and it enriches us in every way. No guilt, no shame, He draws us to Himself and blesses us with what we could never construct on our own. The crucified Savior rose from death. Our captors are defeated. Resurrection is freedom. Easter is your house, your garden, your path to heaven. Easter is God’s government, God’s meadow, God’s final word. God’s Love is freedom. God’s grace is freedom. The sacrament of the altar is freedom. Death has no mastery over us. We will live in freedom. We will live and live and live and live and live and live. Our Easter-King is risen and nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). It’s in His Word, this freedom. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31). What would you say to the person who said that they like being clean but that they can’t stand soap and water? What would you say to the person who

told you that they like their stomach being full but that they refuse to eat? Discipleship, truth, freedom – it's in His Word. One can't ignore His Word and expect these things. Does freedom and grace and truth not pull at you? His Word is a font of freedom. How wonderful is that?!

The courtesy of your hall is somewhat lessened of late, Theoden King. What is the courtesy of our hall? Seriously, what is the courtesy of Christ the King Lutheran Church? The Gospel is unleashed in this place. Grace is our food. Love, God's love, is the warmth that fills this room. Sinners are welcome in this place. God's people flourish beneath His Word and that creates the courtesy of our hall. Children grow in the knowledge of grace in our Sunday school, and they taste freedom at the feet of their teachers. What a joy it is to know the truth. What a joy it is to be free. What a joy it is to be a Christian.