Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Reformation Day (observed)
October 25, 2026
John 8:31-36

Eleutherios: Free Indeed!

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” . . . “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:31-32, 34-36 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

When we think and speak of the Reformation, we usually think of the changes Luther brought to the Church. But don’t ever forget the change that the gospel of Christ had made in him. That’s why, for a couple of years after he had posted the 95 Theses, in some of his letters to his friends, Luther would sign his letters with a change in his name. He signed them as “Martinos Eleutherios.” Let’s find out why he would do that.

Something Jesus says in today’s Gospel was the inspiration for Luther changing his name. But first let’s go back to when Jesus said these words. Our text starts out: “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him. . . .” Jesus had been teaching in the temple, and some of the Jews believed in Him. Others did not. Some had at least an initial attraction to Jesus, but would they continue on and become more firmly grounded?

So Jesus says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.” Not just an initial attraction, but will you continue? Will you abide in my Word? Sometimes people start out liking some of the things about Jesus and what He says. But will they stick with it? Will they abide in Christ’s Word if some of it down the line becomes offensive to them?

After all, at the end of John 6, after Jesus said, “Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you,” it says, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” Or think of the parable of the sower and the seed. Some of those who hear the word immediately receive it with joy, but when trouble or persecution come on account of the Word, they fall away. So not everybody who initially comes to Jesus and His Word stays with it for the long haul.

But those who do, by the grace of God, are truly Christ’s disciples. God gives them the strength to persevere through the tough times. Through the times of questioning and doubt. The Word of God itself is what strengthens us. This is why it is so important for you to continue

steadfastly in God's Word, in the gospel of Christ. Otherwise, your faith will grow weak, and you become increasingly in danger of falling away.

So, do you abide in Christ's Word? Reading it each day? Regularly participating in services here, in God's House? Attentively listening to His Word read and prolaimed? Receiving the Sacrament here at this altar, week after week, month after month, year after year. This is how you abide in Christ's Word. This is how you follow Jesus as His disciple.

"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." This is what happened in Martin Luther's life. It turned out that it was a big mistake when the Roman Church assigned Luther to teach the Bible. Because as Luther continued to study the Scriptures in depth, the more he saw that what the church was teaching did not line up with God's Word. Luther began to see the errors that needed to be corrected. Luther began to see the truth that needed to be proclaimed. By abiding in Christ's Word, Luther came to know the truth.

And this truth set Luther free. It was like the light dawning on a new day. The clear truth of the gospel set Luther free to do the things he did. Like posting those theses against the sale of indulgences. Luther saw in the Scriptures that forgiveness of sins could not be bought and sold through the purchase of certificates. God would not have us bypass repentance and faith in Christ. So Luther spoke up, even if it meant persecution from the higher-ups. And this is what started the Reformation. Christ's Word had set Luther free, and that gave him the courage and the boldness to confess the truth over against error. Of course, Rome didn't like to hear that they had been teaching error.

Likewise, Jesus' opponents didn't like to hear the things he was saying. So, when Jesus said, "The truth will set you free," they took offense. They told Jesus, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" They didn't think they needed to be made free. They thought they were free already.

So Jesus tells them what they needed to be freed from. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." This is the kind of slavery Jesus was talking about. Slavery to sin. And with sin comes death. "The wages of sin is death," the Bible says. You and I need to be set free from our sins and from the death that is its consequence.

And you and I cannot do anything to free ourselves from this bondage to sin and death. Luther tried it and saw that it doesn't work. Young Luther became a monk, and he worked harder at it than anyone else. He was under the impression – because that's what the Roman church was teaching – that by your doing that which was within you, you could make yourself a candidate for God's grace. And thus you could work yourself toward salvation.

But try as he might – and he tried very hard – Luther could not escape the realization that he was still a sinner, still weighed down by guilt. Luther realized that he simply did not love God with all his heart, soul, and mind. And so he thought he was forever damned.

But as time went on, Luther came to see that all of our works cannot offset our sin. Buying indulgences, venerating relics, making pilgrimages, even doing our best at doing good works was not good enough to free ourselves from our plight. Only one way was good enough. And that is the liberation that only Jesus, the Son of God, provides.

As Jesus says in our text: "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." In an ancient household, there could be a slave and there could be a son. The slave does not have the rights and standing of a son. The slave is not free. The son is. If you keep relying on your works to set yourself free, that'll never work. You will remain a slave to sin. On the other hand, if the very Son of God sets you free, then you will be free indeed. You will have the rights and standing of a true son in the household, and you will remain in God's house forever.

This is the truth of the gospel that Luther learned. This is the truth that liberated him and liberates you and me: God's own Son has set us free. As Luther writes in the Catechism, "I believe that Jesus Christ . . . has redeemed me," that is, set me free, "from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil." How? "Not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death." Only the blood of Jesus can set you free. It took the death of God's Son, dying for my sins and your sins and the sins of the whole world to atone for our sins, taking God's judgment in our place, so that we would not die forever but instead have eternal life. Through faith in Christ, worked by the Holy Spirit by means of the Word and Sacraments, we obtain God's forgiveness and share in Christ's resurrection victory. This is most certainly true! It was true for Jesus' hearers back then. It was true for Luther at the time of the Reformation. And it is true for you today.

So, what did this have to do with Luther's name change and why he signed his letters "Martinos Eleutherios." Well, actually, Luther's name at birth was Martin "Luder," with a "d," "L-u-d-e-r." And that was the name he used into adulthood. But after his discovery of the gospel, when it began to dawn on him that only Christ could set him free, he began to sign his name as "Martinos Eleutherios," even using the Greek letters for "Eleutherios." And here is how it connects to our text today: Wherever Jesus says "free"–"the truth will set you free," "if the Son sets you free"–it's a form of the Greek word "eleutheros."

And that's how Martin Luder was now thinking of himself: as one set free by Christ! So for a couple of years he signed his name: "Martinos Eleutherios," "Martin, the one set free!" Later he shortened "Eleutherios" to just "Luther," which sounded close enough to his original name, "Luder." But for the rest of his life, Luther always thought of himself as one set free by Christ.

So, since Christ has set you free, you are, like Luther, "Eleutherios: Free Indeed!" To the glory of His holy Name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener