

October 29, 2017: Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Reformation Sunday – All Saints Day
John 8:31-36: Truths That Set Us Free

Before I had a job and kids and needed to go to bed early so I wouldn't be emotional, I used to watch movies. One of my favorites was a movie called Shawshank Redemption. If you haven't seen it. It's a story about a guy named Andy Dufresne who was wrongly convicted of a very serious crime. So he was sent to prison, and served nearly twenty years, before managing to escape through an elaborate, carefully laid out, plan. I hate to give away the ending, but it's been out for twenty-three years, so if you haven't seen it, you probably are not going to. There is a lot more too it that what I described, but that's the basic idea. Movies about redemption have always been my favorite. This one even has the word in the title.

Like most movies there are sub-plots that contribute to the larger plot. And one of them in this movie involves an older man that Andy befriends in prison named Brooks. Brooks is this gentle old man who serves as the prison librarian and has a pet bird that he carries around in his pocket. One day Andy is shocked to find Brooks holding a knife to another inmate's throat, threatening to kill him. He doesn't follow through with it, but Andy cannot understand why he would even think about it.

Another prisoner explains that it probably had something to do with the fact that Brooks was about to be paroled, and he was fearful of what life would be like outside the prison. He had been there nearly fifty years and he couldn't imagine anything different. Eventually he was paroled, given a job as a bagger at a grocery store, and a place to live at a half-way house. It was all too much for him. He considered robbing from the store, or killing his manager, who he really didn't like, so that he would be sent back to prison. Fortunately, he decided against that, but then, sadly, he took his own life.

As I said earlier, I know it's just a sub plot, but this part of the movie has always intrigued me. That is because it is so hard for me, and I don't think I'm alone in this, to understand why anyone would choose imprisonment over freedom. And yet it happens everyday. It has happened many times throughout history.

We are all familiar with the story of Israel, and the period of time they spent as slaves in Egypt, and how God sent Moses to lead them out of captivity. The Israelites had not been free for too long when they started to look back fondly on their time in slavery, wishing they could return to Egypt. Life was hard in the wilderness. But how could it be worse than living in bondage?

We move forward several hundred years to the time of Jesus and the people of God are experiencing freedom once more, albeit a different sort of freedom, the freedom that can only be found in Jesus. Then some of them stopped believing, deciding they would prefer to return to prison. Not a literal prison, but a prison of pride, pride that kept them from seeing the truth that Jesus was trying to teach them. They believed a spot was reserved for them in God's kingdom simply because they were descendants of Abraham. They ignored Jesus' calls for true repentance and striving to live a life consistent with his teachings. If they would only humble themselves and follow Jesus, they would be free once more. But they chose to remain in this jail of their own making.

This pattern repeats itself. God's people find freedom, then find themselves back in captivity. For some it is a decision they make. For most, it is a decision that is made for them, but their religious leaders. This is the situation the people of God found themselves in in the early 16th century. They are in prison. It's not identical to the prisons of their ancestors, but a prison all the same.

It was a prison of ignorance. There were a few exceptions, but 99.9% of Christians, at least those in Europe, were part of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church held an enormous amount of power and influence over the lives of the people who sat in the pews. This was partly because of the incredible amount of political power they held, but it was also because of the information they controlled. The Bible they used was written in Latin, which nobody but the trained clergy understood. So the average person had no idea the Bible actually said, only what the religious leaders told them. And much of what their religious leader told them was not Scriptural, but doctrines and beliefs formed in the hearts and minds of men.

It was a prison of fear.

A fear of excommunication if they challenged the Church. Because the Roman Catholic Church was the only church and held so much power, excommunication meant they would lose their social support system, and even their salvation.

A fear of condemnation. The God their church portrayed was a vengeful God, full of wrath, waiting in the wings for them to make one false move and be doomed to hell or a lengthy sentence in purgatory. The Church used this fear to exploit them, selling them something called an indulgence, which was basically something they could buy to insure their place in heaven. The Church needed the funds to build a new basilica in Rome.

One of the many who were wasting away in this prison was a man named Martin Luther. Much like God chose Moses to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt, God chose Martin Luther, along with several others, to lead his people to freedom.

To escape the wrath of God, Martin Luther decided to enter the priesthood. As part of his preparation for this vocation, he learned Latin, which in turn gave him the ability to read the Scriptures. And from his study of the Scriptures he came to believe certain truths, truths that led him to experience the freedom that God wants to give to all his people. So he felt compelled to share these truths with others, so that they too could be liberated.

All this and more led to his decision, on October 31, 1517, to nail his 95 Theses to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. These 95 Theses were basically points of disagreement he had with the Roman Catholic Church. I'm going to read those to you this morning, in their entirety. I'm not. That would take forever. And there is a lot of repetition. And you would feel like you are in prison. In a way you are. Your desire not to draw attention to yourself, and just get up and leave, makes you a captive audience.

I've decided to imagine what Martin Luther's 95 Theses would look like if he published them on twitter, and was limited to 140 characters. Not exactly, but I want to summarize them as briefly as possible, and suggest to you there were two fundamental truths that Martin Luther believed would lead the people to freedom.

The first truth is that the Bible is the ultimate authority in all things necessary to salvation. This grew from Martin Luther's realization that so much of what the Church was teaching its members was not in the Scripture. Since the Scriptures are the only thing we can rightly consider the Word of God, anything we believe to be true or necessary for our salvation must be supported by them. Luther also realized that if the people could not read the Scriptures for themselves, they had no way of holding their religious leaders accountable. This led him to translate the Bible from Latin into German, so people could read it. And all this was happening in conjunction with the invention of the printing press, which facilitated the distribution of the Bible to more people. It was a great example of the way God's timing is perfect.

The second truth is that salvation is a gift that is freely given. This means that there is nothing we could ever do to earn our salvation. We are not saved because of the way we live, because of the amount of money we give to charity, because of the number of times we go to church, because we are a member, and certainly not because we buy indulgences. We are saved for no other reason than because God loves us. This realization gave Martin Luther such a different view of God than he had before he read the Scriptures. He came to understand that God loves us, that God is for us, not against us. That God longs to forgive us. That God is not willing that any should perish. His will is to save us, all of us.

As I mentioned, alongside Martin Luther there were several others, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, just to name a few. These men pointed the followers of Jesus toward freedom. But history has a way of repeating itself.

It didn't take long before human doctrines became the ultimate authority. There was still a sincere reliance on the Scriptures, but human logic and reason took control. Many of the reformers the Word of God in a box, imposing their systems of thought on the Scriptures, forcing the words to support their ideas.

Others took Luther's idea of salvation by grace so far that it led them to a different prison, the prison of believing that God does not expect or enable us to change. This was the subject of the sermon two weeks ago. People found themselves as prisoners of sin, having no hope, believing that freedom from the power of sin was not possible. Yet the Bible so clearly says otherwise. Growth, transformation, freedom is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In fairness to them, we have to admit, we are not really that different. Are we truly free? Do we have our own prisons to escape from?

I think we still struggle with the idea that because we are saved by grace, how we live our lives doesn't matter. Or believing that change is even possible. I don't think I need to belabor that point again, at least not today. But this is a big one for me.

We still struggle with allowing other things to take the place of Scripture. Whether it be human doctrines, or popular opinion, or the words of so-called experts. Scripture must take first place in the formation of our beliefs about God and the kind of person he created us to be.

One more prison we find ourselves in, that I haven't mentioned yet, is the prison of believing we have to do things the way we have always done them, just because it's the way we've always done them.

Why did Brooks want to return to prison so badly he took his own life? Why have the people of God wanted to return to prison so many times throughout history? Why do we keep turning from the freedom God wants to give us?

We've have been in prison for so long. It's familiar. It's safe. It's what we are used to. It's what makes sense to us. Freedom, on the other hand, is none of those things. Freedom is unknown. Freedom is scary. Freedom takes us out of our comfort zone. Freedom always maintains an element of mystery. Freedom requires faith. Freedom requires trust. Only where there is freedom can the truth be found. Where we find the truth, we find Jesus.

We should give God thanks for the Reformers. We should honor them by continuing the work they started, continuing to reform, always remaining open to the liberating grace of God, moving toward freedom, moving away from captivity.