

"The Liberator Who Sets You Free"

October 26, 2025

John 8:31-35

Reformation Sunday

I. The Liberator

This morning I want to start with an allegory:

The Liberator strides through the halls of the prison, keys jingling in his hand. His wounds are fresh, but the battle is won. At each cell door he stops, turns the lock and throws open the door. "Come out!" he shouts. "I've come to set you free! I haven't come to plunder or to take what little you have. I've come to release you from this prison and give you all sorts of gifts. There's food and clothing outside-riches in abundance, and I give them to you freely! Your ruler was a tyrant who would keep you in your cells until the day you died. I've defeated him. I've destroyed him. He's not coming back. Come out of your cells! Come out of the prison! I've set you all free!"

The doors stand open, as do the prison gates outside. The tyrant and his armies are decimated. The Liberator has done all the work to release these people from their prison. "Come forth!" He calls again. "You are free!"

A few heads poke warily out of cells, but there is little other movement. From the cell of Doubtful Suspicion, a voice cries out, "What do you want in return?" "Nothing!" cries the Liberator. "As I have already said, I will say again. I have not come to take from you, but to give you freedom and so much more. Come out! You're free!"

From the cell of Pedigree comes another voice: "What do you mean, we're free? We've never considered ourselves to be anything but free in the first place. What makes us any freer now?" The Liberator responds, "You've been imprisoned so long that bondage is all you have ever known. You've been told that it is freedom, but it is not. You are in a cell, but I've flung the door wide open. Come out! You're free!"

Across the hallway, an intelligent voice speaks from the cell of Reasonable Rejection: "Thank you for your offer, but we have elected to remain. You see, we've thought about this long and hard, and we've decided that you don't exist. Therefore, your freedom isn't real. After consultation, we've decided to remain in the cell. We know that we're going to die here and have no hope beyond that, but we'll make the most of the time that we have here in prison." The Liberator cries out, "Whether you believe it or not, the battle is fought, I am here and the door is open. Don't rely on your logical conclusions! Come out! Be free!"

Next comes a surprisingly joyous voice from the cell of Syncretism: "O thank you for your offer, but there is no need! You see, we've made our own liberator. We've fashioned him out of straw and clay and our own ideas and desires, and he's been our liberator for quite some time now. Of course, we don't want to exclude you, either; so from now on we'll consider our liberator to be just like you. O happy day!" To this the Liberator declares, "But your liberator is not like me. He is only as free as those who have made him, and he is only inside the cell and cannot get out. Don't put your trust in straw and clay and your own wisdom, for all of that has kept you in your cage. I am no dead brick; I have conquered your tyrant. Come out! Be free!"

There's some murmuring further down the hallway, and a voice emerges. From the cell of Veiled Blindness, it says, "Our ruler warned us about you! He said that if you showed up here, you'd make us give up all that we have to make us follow you. He warned you that you'd be worse. We're not coming out!" "And what would I have you give up?" demands the Liberator. "I desire that you give up the rags that you wear in exchange for new clothes. I desire that you give up hunger and starvation in exchange for nourishing food.

I desire that you give up darkness, disease, death and decay; in exchange, I give you light and life forever! Consider the source of the warning: The one who warned you was the ruler who kept you in chains, and he's a liar from start to finish. I've come to save you! Come out! You are free!"

From the darkness behind another open door, another voice: "We are so happy that you have come, and we see the door wide open! We look forward to joining you in the freedom that lies outside. In fact, as we have been for the past centuries, we are busy chipping away at this wall with our spoons. We haven't made a dent yet; but it's only a matter of time until we make our escape by our own hand." The voice from the cell of Futile Effort fades away, replaced by the scraping of silverware on granite. The Liberator shouts, "Put down the spoons and cease your efforts! The door is open because I've done all the work! Come out! Come forth now! You are free!"

The Liberator remains, calling for all to hear. He continues to warn them of the death they face in that prison. He warns them that their efforts will not save them. He warns them of the lies of the ruler who has kept them bound. And all the while, he calls them forth to have life, to be free.

Time and time again, though, voices emerge from the darkness, giving one reason or another why prison is preferred. Why do so many look for excuses not to be free? But here and there, it happens. From one cell or another, a poor wretch emerges. Blinking in the unaccustomed light, he would fall and fail if the Liberator did not hold him up and keep him on the journey. One by one they come, and after a while a crowd of former prisoners stands outside. They are clothed and fed. They are strengthened and enlivened. They have new life within them, because the Liberator has set them free. They need never return to the prison again.

And yet, absurd as it sounds, some of them do. Some of them return to their cells. It may be because they just like the darkness and the life of the cell better. It may be that they just won't trust the Liberator's ongoing kindness. It may be that they hear the voices of former comrades calling them back, and they elect to join the old club once again. It's a strange phenomenon, because many of those who return believe they are still liberated. "I spent some time with the Liberator. I heard him speak. I ate and wore his clothes. Because I met him that day, I am free. Sure, I'm back in the prison with the same old stuff. My clothes have returned to rags and I'm starving again. But I once listened to the voice of the Liberator and I was with him then, so I must still be free." It's a terrible delusion, for he's returned to his prison and slipped chains back on his wrists. And all the while, the cell door still stands open, and the Liberator still calls.

Those outside continue in his care. They remain fed and clothed, healthy and free. They're free because the Liberator has come, and the Liberator remains. He's fought, he's set them free, and he will continue to protect and preserve them. Forever.

II. The Son Who Sets You Free

For, of course, the Liberator of our allegory is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. He has defeated sin, death and the devil, all of which sought to keep you enslaved and lost forever. The risen Christ still bears the wounds on His body-the nail prints in His hands and the spear-pierce in His side, for these testify that He has won the victory and crushed the head of the enemy.

And now, victorious, the Son of God cries out to the world, "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." There is no better news: Once the world was lost forever to the bondage of sin and death. Now, the Son of God offers freedom for all.

Yet, out of the dark prison of sin, the objections still emerge against the Lord and His cross. For one reason or another, people don't want to be free.

Those in the Gospel lesson objected that they needed no liberation, because they had never been imprisoned in the first place: "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?" (Jn. 8:32) To which Jesus responded, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (Jn. 8:34). No matter their heritage and rules, they still sinned and were slaves to sin; and Jesus sought to set them free. So He called out "Come out! Be free!" with the words, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

At the time of Luther, the leading objection was this: "The Lord Jesus has died for our sins-to help us escape the prison of hell, and that is good. Now, we will break ourselves out of our cell to meet Him by our prayers and works and payments." It's the equivalent to digging through the granite wall with a spoon while the cell door is open behind you. Thus the Lord declares in the epistle for today, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Ro. 3:20). In other words, no works and deeds can save you. But the next verse says this: "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed." There is a way to freedom from sin, and Romans 3 goes on to declare that this is found in Jesus. So the Lord still cries out today, "If you try to save yourselves by your own works and prayers and decisions, you will never be free. But if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Other objections arise in our present day, and you've heard them all before. Many have decided that the Lord does not exist, and therefore His offer of salvation and freedom is imaginary; but no matter how much man insists that the Lord does not exist, He remains. Many others have created another god; and the growing fad is to say that any god is just another face for Jesus. But the difference is clear: Jesus is the Son of God become flesh to rescue them from their prison of sin; all those other gods are dead things that they have created while doing time. Others shun the freedom and eternal life because they are too much in love with their sin, or too afraid of giving it up-whatever "it" might be: immorality, greed, materialism, self-esteem, whatever. Yet all of these things they cling to only isolate. Immorality only leaves one used and lonelier. Greed insists on having more than others, which loses friends fast. Pride insists on being better than the rest, and so it shuns others, too. First, they isolate; then, they kill. They may feel like freedom, but they are chains that delight to destroy. And the Savior calls out, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Why the blindness? Why do so many seek to remain in prison? Why do so many shun the light and the freedom of forgiveness? This tells us something about how lost man is. Sin is not like a pair of socks-something on the outside that we can just cast off; no, sin infects us to the core of our soul. By nature, we are not good people who happen to be attacked by sin. We are sinful by nature. In that sinfulness, we are so blinded that we cannot see the danger we are in. We are so dead that there is no way we can make ourselves free. In that sinfulness, we naturally choose to go against God's will.

Left to ourselves, by nature we will choose the prison of sin every single time. But the Lord calls out, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." His cry of freedom is His powerful Word, and His Word grants the grace and faith needed to be free. He has conquered sin, death and the devil at the cross. He has flung wide open the gates of prison; and now, by His powerful Word, He calls all to freedom. He once commanded, "Lazarus, come forth," and a dead man came out of His tomb. He has declared His forgiveness and life to you, and so He has raised you from the dead.

The Lord offers this salvation to all who hear His Word. Not all who hear, however, will be saved: His Word gives them the faith that they need to be saved, but He does not force anyone to leave the prison of sin. If they stay, so be it, for He will compel no one to be free.

It is His Word that delivers the forgiveness, faith and freedom. Added to water, His Word sets free in Holy Baptism; added to bread and wine, His Word strengthens the faith of the believer. Therefore, it is both a great privilege and imperative for the Church to continue to proclaim His Word. The church of the

Reformation affirmed this truth by using the four letters you see on the front of today's bulletin: VDMA. In Latin they stand for *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum* (The Word of the Lord Endures Forever). I encourage you to read the history of this monogram from the insert in today's bulletin.

This brings us to one more warning, for Reformation is not only about the salvation of the individual; it is about the Reformation of the Church. "The Church is always under reformation," said Luther; it must always make sure it remains steadfast to that Word which frees sinners from prison by the grace of Christ. Reformation is never more necessary than today.

This is true because so many church leaders and church bodies have capitulated to the objections of the world. "You don't believe that Jesus is truly the Son of God become flesh who died for your sins? Oh, then, we will agree with you. We will still call ourselves 'church,' but we will only talk about life in this world since we don't believe in eternal life." Or, "You want to call yourself a Christian but justify your immorality? Then we will agree with you: We will make tolerance the high virtue and vote that perversion is good. And if the majority votes that immorality is okay with God, then it must be so." Or, "You want to say that other religions worship the same God, or that Jesus is the same god worshiped by all religions? All right, then we will teach the same thing, too." Or, "You want to make religion all about your works? Then we will tell you that you can fulfill the Law and give you suggestions how, rather than tell you of the Gospel."

Time and time again, churches and church leaders have elected to yield to these objections. Perversely, this is often done in the name of evangelism: "If we teach such things, then more will come into the church-and thus more will be free from their prison." But this is not so! When churches submit to the demands of the world, they are not freeing people from the prison of sin.

Instead, they are imprisoning themselves and saying, "We are now with you, and we will tell you that you are free." But no one has been set free; such "Christians" have only surrendered themselves to the bondage of sin.

Woe to the church and the preacher who declare that sin and freedom go together. This is a terrible sin, for it assures sinners that they are free when they are not. It tells them they are forgiven and need not repent when they remain condemned for their sin. So they mislead the sinner not to heaven but to hell, for the freedom they preach is no freedom at all.

This is why the church's Reformation is never an innovation away from the Gospel, but always a return to its pure preaching. This is why, by the grace of God, we continue to preach His Law which warns of the consequences of sin. And this is why, by the grace of God, we preach Christ crucified, Christ who lived for you, died for you and rose again. Christ who, by His Word, declares to you today, "I have set you free from sin. And if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed."

We continue to declare this message, because we have been set free by it. On this Reformation Sunday, rejoice in this great freedom, which the Lord grants you by these words: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.