

Some five hundred years ago the church was in need of reform. October 31, 1517 is pointed to as the date in history when this reform began to take place. Reform means to change for the better. To improve something that is in need of being improved. And this begs the question, is there ever a time when the church is not in need of reform?

God's Word is free from error. Indeed, the Bible cannot err for it is the true Word of God. But error can and does creep into the church because the church is made up of people, sinful people, people who are prone to error.

When the church abides in Jesus' words, not turning aside to the right or to the left, the church abides in the truth, for Jesus is the Truth. But in our day, when we see church bodies dismissing the Word of God to embrace our pagan culture, is it not obvious that reform is necessary to call the church back to the truth? If the church itself is badly in need of reform, how can it be the place, Sunday after Sunday, where people can come expecting to hear the truth? And as Jesus says, only the truth will set us free.

Now the Jews to whom Jesus speaks in our text do not like these words. They react to them. What do you mean, "Set us free?" We are not slaves and never have been. We are children of Abraham. How dare you speak to us like that!

What about us? Are we like them, or are we teachable? Do we react to Jesus' words, or do we listen to them and take them to heart? "*Everyone who commits sin,*" He says, "*is a slave to sin.*" Do you think of yourself as a slave? We admit that we are sinners. But are we willing to admit that we are enslaved to our sins?

"*Who can discern his errors?*" cries the psalmist. It is impossible to keep track of all our sins, let alone to count the number of times we sin. Perhaps it would be helpful if, every time we commit sin, a ball and chain would be strapped to us. It wouldn't take long before we would not be able to move. Would not that be a helpful way of demonstrating that we truly are slaves to sin?

And if we stop to ponder this thought, we will realize that a ball and chain really does attach itself to us with every sin. Not physically to our legs. But mentally, emotionally, spiritually. A guilty conscience is much heavier, and more of a burden, than any ball and chain around our body. And when our heart and mind is thus weighed down because of the sins we commit, our physical body will be affected, and it will actually feel like we are dragging around a heavy ball and chain.

So, what do we need? Reform? Do we need to be changed for the better? To be improved? No. We do not need a reformation. We need a resurrection. You cannot reform sin. You can only kill it. You cannot improve a ball and chain by giving it a fresh coat of paint. It must simply be cut off.

We speak of the Reformation of the Church. Yet the church is not where sinners come to be reformed. We come here to die and to be raised to life. This is how the Son sets us free. Not by changing us into better people. He sets us free from our sins by drowning us in our baptismal waters with Him, and raising us to life in those same waters with Him.

The Jews were offended when Jesus told them, "*the truth will set you free.*" "*We are offspring of Abraham,*" they said with pride, "*and have never been enslaved to anyone.*" Have they forgotten that it was the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who were enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt? And it was God who brought them out of their slavery. Not by reforming them. Not by changing them into better people. He brought them out of slavery through the waters of the Red Sea.

Already then, God was setting the standard for all time. He sets His people free through death and resurrection. As the children of Abraham entered those waters, they died to Pharaoh's mastery over them. And as they came up out of those waters of the sea, they were raised to the new life that was set before them.

And so, no, the church is not in the business of reforming people. But it is in the business of setting people free from their sins through death and resurrection. And it all begins with Jesus' death and resurrection.

The heaviest weight you can every imagine is what was laid upon Him as He hung on the cross. It was the weight of our sin and the sin of the whole world – and the guilt, and the shame, and the consequences and punishment, God's righteous wrath. It was all laid, thrust, upon Jesus.

The innocent Son of God took all of that upon Himself. And when He died, it died with Him. When He was buried, it went with Him into the tomb. But when Jesus burst forth from the grave, He left it all behind. And there it stays, and will stay forever, buried in that tomb. Jesus' death and resurrection destroyed the power of sin. It has no power to enslave you. Sin is a defeated enemy.

And yet we sin, don't we? Every day we sin. And by committing sin, we give it power over us. We make sin our master, becoming its slaves, by obeying it. That which we obey is our master. And sin is a very cruel master just as Pharaoh was. Sin causes us to feel shame. It gives us a guilty conscience. It breaks apart marriages and ruins lives. And it brings death in the end. A very heavy and painful ball and chain indeed.

Jesus defeated sin by dying and rising again. But how does His victory over sin help you? How do you benefit? How does it become your victory over sin? This is how: by dying and rising with Jesus in your baptism into Christ. You are not just baptized. You are baptized, says the apostle, into Jesus' death and resurrection. This means that Jesus' victory over sin is your victory. In your baptism you died to sin with Jesus and you were raised to life with Him.

When the Israelites crossed through the Red Sea, Pharaoh's army followed them into the water. But there they all drowned as the waters covered them. Pharaoh, at that very moment, lost all power over the Israelites. They were his slaves no longer.

Neither is sin your master. For, like with Pharaoh's army, all your sin is put to death, drowned forever in the Red Sea waters of your baptism into Christ. And so, through your baptism the Son sets you free. Yes, you still sin every day. Little sins, big sins. All of them defeated. Yet all of them able to defeat you and me if we give that power to them.

This is why, here in church, Sunday after Sunday, we need, not a reformation, but a resurrection. We need to die to sin and rise to life with Jesus, again, and again, and again because we sin again, and again, and again. And this is exactly what happens here in the Divine Service. In confessing your sins, you die to sin. In hearing and believing the Word of Absolution, of forgiveness, Jesus raises you to life, the life He gives you in your baptism. In hearing the words of the sermon, you put to death your sins through the Law that accuses you. But in hearing the good news of Jesus in the sermon, you are raised to life with Him. In coming up to the Holy Supper, you come forward a sinner, you leave a saint, for Jesus' own flesh and blood has touched your lips and rendered you clean, forgiven.

The ball and chain that weighs heavily upon you is removed, cut off, because your sins, all of them, are forgiven, washed away by Jesus' blood. He has, in truth, set you free. Amen.