

John 8:31-36

Remembrance / Reformation Sunday

November 7, 2021

*Went the day well?*

*We died and never knew.*

*But, well or ill,*

*Freedom, we died for you.*

John Maxwell Edmonds, an English poet, wrote this epitaph for the dead of the First World War. They died; they do not know whether they died for a victorious cause or not. They do not know the course of our days, our joys and tragedies, our happiness or sorrows. But they died for our freedom to have those days, and to determine for ourselves, as much as possible, the course of those days. As he says in a better-known epitaph,

*When you go home, tell them of us and say,*

*For your tomorrows these gave their today.*

Freedom is a word that will be used a lot on Remembrance Day. The Veterans Affairs website says, “Veterans want Canadians to understand the price of freedom. They are passing the torch to the people of Canada, so the memory of their sacrifices will continue, and the values they fought for will live on in all of us.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Remembrance.” *Veterans Affairs Canada*, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance>.

What is this freedom? It may be a physical freedom from confinement and slavery; it may be a spiritual freedom of the heart and mind. The German writer Lorenz Diefenbach claimed, “*Arbeit macht frei*”; “Work Makes You Free.” His idea was that hard work and self-sacrifice leads to a kind of virtue or purification or spiritual freedom.<sup>2</sup> We all know the way a hard day’s work in the garden can clear one’s mind and make us feel satisfied.

But the idea of freedom can be twisted and perverted into oppression. *Arbeit Macht Frei*: few of us after 1945 know the name Lorenz Diefenbach, but most of know that this phrase stood over the entrance to Auschwitz.

The concept of freedom is also debated today.

We’re all sick of COVID; we’re all sick of health restrictions that limit where we can travel, who we can visit, when we can sing. We’re all tired of wearing *these* [masks].

And some of us have decided not to take it any more. Aren’t we supposed to be free? Didn’t our young people go off to war, didn’t they bleed and die, so that we could be free from somebody telling us how to live our lives? Don’t we live in a free country?

Why, this is *Nazism*, they say! Didn’t the Nazis tell people where they could and couldn’t go, who they could and couldn’t associate with? Didn’t they conduct medical experiments on people without their permission? Those who refuse these vaccines are *freedom fighters*, but they’re treated like Jews in the Holocaust.

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<sup>2</sup> “Arbeit Macht Frei,” *Wikipedia*.

Or are they?

What does freedom really mean?

Didn't Jesus say something about freedom?

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’”

Jesus was a Jew, speaking to Jews; this passage shows him in a debate that was probably played out decades after his death, when early Christians both Jew and Gentile began to define themselves in contrast to their Jewish origins and Jewish neighbours.

Jesus' listeners don't get it. “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free”?”

Freedom is the point of the Exodus story, which is itself central to Jewish identity. God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in the wilderness, forged them into a people, and showed them a land where they could determine their own fate. Their central truth is that they have freedom through the work of God, who spoke to Moses and through Moses and declared them free.

But to say “We have never been slaves to anyone” is of course a wild exaggeration. The Exodus story itself begins in slavery, and their story from then until Jesus' time was a mixture of national self-determination, and domination by foreign

peoples. The Jews of Jesus' time are of course under Roman domination. So, to assert, "we have never been slaves to anyone" is to deny their own history and their current circumstances.<sup>3</sup> It is not, in fact, true.

What, then, is this truth that Jesus offers? Jesus offers the truth about himself. As the beginning of the Gospel states, Jesus is the Word of God coming into the world. The Word is not just words about God, or even words spoken by God, but the Word that makes itself true. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light – and so on. Jesus is the Word of God, who *speaks* the Word of God. Similarly, Jesus is the Son of God: the one after God's own heart and nature, the one who speaks with the authority of his Father.

The Jews assert that their freedom comes from being children of Abraham, but Jesus says that freedom is about what you do, not who you are. If you live as a slave, he says, you are a slave. Freedom is knowing God as your Father; and if you know the Son, Jesus, and listen to what he has to say, then you recognize your common Father. To reject Jesus as the Son is to reject your own place in the household of God.

That's all very well, but *how* does knowing yourself as a child of God make you free, and what does that freedom mean?

Reformation Sunday was last week, but this text was central to the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther's third treatise, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, invites us

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<sup>3</sup> "John 8:31-38," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume IX: Luke, John (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 636-639.

into relationship with God and celebrates the fact that we are, as Jesus says, children in our Father's house. We don't have to earn our freedom; this relationship is our birthright. This frees us from trying to earn God's love through good works: by going to Church, by giving to charity, by reciting prayers, or anything else. Martin Luther understood the Jews to be trying to do this – *misunderstood* them, arguably – and understood the Roman Catholic church of his day to be falling back into this mindset as well.<sup>4</sup>

But he goes on to say, like Paul, that we must be careful in using this freedom. We should boldly assert our freedom to those popes and bishops that try to lay heavy burdens on us, he says, but we should also avoid flaunting our freedom in the faces of those who do not yet understand this freedom, lest we appear to be throwing away our faith altogether.

We are free, in other words, but not free to harm others with our freedom.

Which brings us back, full circle, to Remembrance.

“Veterans want Canadians to understand the price of freedom. They are passing the torch to the people of Canada, so the memory of their sacrifices will continue, and the values they fought for will live on in all of us.”

They sacrificed for our freedom, and they fought for their values. What values are those, if not the values of sacrifice for the common good? What is freedom in Christ, if

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4 Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

not the freedom to live *as Christ*: to care for those who are our siblings in the household of God?

We are free; but if we use our freedom to harm others, then we are instead slaves to sin.