

Reformation

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

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October 28, 2018

O freedom, O freedom, O freedom, freedom is coming O yes I, O yes I know, O yes I know, O yes I know, freedom is coming, O yes I know.

Freedom is Coming: Text & Music: South African; 1984, Utryck, admin Walton Music Corp.

Just to be clear, no, this not the theme song of our confirming class today! They may be glad that their official classes are completed after a little more than two years (even though we have a great time in class) but these are words of hope and liberation from an old South African song. It was sung in those times by people struggling with oppression caused by apartheid and it is still sung to remind us of the biblical promise of justice and liberation for all the world. It calls us to tenaciously hope for and work for liberation alongside of God.

It might be a bit hard for us to truly grasp what such a cry for freedom means. When Jesus spoke of being set free, those who heard it couldn't imagine what he was talking about either – “we're not slaves to anyone!” they boldly declared. And, I think I can safely assume that none of us have experienced slavery either. What would it have been like to sing such songs and pass them from one generation to another? What would it have been like to proclaim hope where liberation seemed impossible? What would it have been like to be watched, worked, manipulated at every turn? Interesting things to ponder, but even more so, how their voice of hope never gave up.

This might all sound like a long time ago, but in reality injustice continues, and alongside of it so do the dreams of survival, hope and protest. What does injustice look like today? Recently, it has sounded like the hum of engines that propel boats of refugees across dangerous waters to new lands. It looks like the dust kicked up

by the feet of thousands who march north through Mexico to the United States. You can see hope in the eyes of our young people who have dared to become beacons of radical welcome and who teach us along the way. And it tastes like bread and wine given by Christ as a foretaste of a love we can't begin to comprehend.

We don't always have a choice about what enslaves us, but we always have the choice to know freedom by the love of God.

Today, we commemorate the Reformation and Martin Luther, who initially had no idea of his own captivity, at least until he read the passage from Romans that we heard today. In his time, sin was inescapable condemnation, God was to be feared. People, like Martin Luther, felt the crushing weight of imperfection. But then he read, "we are made right with God through faith" and it changed everything!

Luther came to realize that grace and love are free gifts to us from a loving God. We've heard this many times and not unlike how hard it is for us to understand slavery it is perhaps even more difficult to get grace. So let me share a story from Jeremy Bourma to help us:

"Because I'm Yours"¹

I never dreamed that taking a child to Disney World could be so difficult — or that such a trip could teach me so much about God's outrageous grace.

Our middle daughter had been previously adopted by another family. After a couple of rough years, they dissolved the adoption, and we ended up welcoming an eight-year-old girl into our home.

For one reason or another, whenever our daughter's previous family vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but they left their adopted daughter with a

¹ <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-perfect-illustration-for-gods-outrageous-grace-an-excerpt-from-proof/>

family friend. Usually — at least in the child's mind — this happened because she did something wrong that precluded her presence on the trip.

And so, by the time we adopted our daughter, she had seen many pictures of Disney World and she had heard about the rides and the characters and the parades. But when it came to passing through the gates of the Magic Kingdom, she had always been the one left on the outside.

In the month leading up to our trip to the Magic Kingdom, she stole food when a simple request would have gained her a snack. She lied when it would have been easier to tell the truth. She whispered insults that were carefully crafted to hurt her older sister as deeply as possible — and, as the days on the calendar moved closer to the trip, her mutinies multiplied.

A couple of days before our family headed to Florida, I pulled our daughter into my lap to talk through her latest escapade. “I know what you’re going to do,” she stated flatly. “You’re not going to take me to Disney World, are you?”

The easiest response would have been, “If you don’t start behaving better, you’re right, we won’t take you” — but, by God’s grace, I didn’t. Instead, I asked her, “Is this trip something we’re doing as a family?” She nodded, brown eyes wide and tear-rimmed. “Then you’re going with us.”

I’d like to say that her behaviors grew better after that moment. They didn’t. Her choices pretty much spiraled out of control at every hotel and rest stop all the way. Still, we headed to Disney World on the day we had promised.

In our hotel room that evening, a very different child emerged. She was exhausted, pensive, and a little weepy at times, but her month-long facade of rebellion had faded. When bedtime rolled around, I prayed with her, held her, and asked, “So how was your first day at Disney World?”

She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. "Daddy," she said, "I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours."

"It wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours."

We call that "grace." Ridiculous, radical, irrational grace. And its good news for all of us, but especially today, for our confirmands. You have a lot of life to come ahead of you. Right now you might feel like things are going pretty well, but just tuck this in your back pocket, wear it on your sleeve, stick it on your bathroom mirror: you belong to God. It's a promise that goes with you into every day of life, whether they be days of celebration or challenge.

It's a gift of God's that is never offered based on what we have achieved or kept from us, because of what we have done or left undone, but it is solely a holy love freely given. We get it because we have a place of belonging with God.

How great is that?

Thanks be to God! Amen.