

+ John 8:31-36 + Series: Blessed... + Theme: Blessed Are Those Who Remain! +
+ Reformation Sunday + 30 October 2016 +

“Stay” isn’t just something you tell the family dog. “Stay here!” A father tells his 5-year-old to stand right on the parking space line while he helps her little sister out of their car. The parking lot is busy and staying on that line right next to their car will keep the child out of harm’s way from oncoming traffic. “Stay in the yard. Don’t go anywhere else!” As her kids head outside to play, their mother tells them to stay nearby so they remain within earshot and within sight. “Stay there. Don’t leave!” You tell your friend to stay in one place so you can find them on a busy Saturday at a crowded Destiny the weekend before Christmas. “Go to a safe place and stay there until the storm has passed.” A severe thunderstorm threatens to produce large hail, heavy rain, and even tornadoes—not weather for running errands or traveling around town. Stay. Remain. Do not leave.

When you tell someone to “stay,” there’s usually a good reason—safety, protection, your own good or the good of others, your concern, your love, your desire to make things easier for you or others. While there are plenty of reasons and opportunities to go someplace else, staying where you or your loved one need to be can be just as important.

The same is true for your life as a Christian. Are you staying where you need to be or wandering where you should not go? Are you continuing in the Word of God or discontinuing the Word of God as part of your daily life? Are you remaining in the Word or following whatever happens to distract or get your attention? Last week we began looking at what it means to be called “blessed” by our God—why are we blessed and how are we blessed by him. James, the half-brother of Jesus, encouraged us, **“Blessed are those who persevere.”** (James 1:12) This morning as we celebrate the 499th anniversary of the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, Jesus encourages us, **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO REMAIN!**

Remaining in one place was very important 499 years ago. You see, 499 years ago tomorrow, an Augustinian monk with a roll of parchment in one hand and a hammer in the other walked up to the main door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany, the church more aptly known as “The Castle Church” because of its castle-like design. The monk unrolled the parchment on an open spot on that heavy wooden door and began tapping away at four nails he had brought along.

At first, nobody noticed since that door served as the town bulletin board and people posted announcements there every day. What people didn’t realize was that that parchment attached to the door contained 95 theses or statements that would begin one of the most important movements in the history of the western world. That monk, who also served as a university professor of theology and as a pastor at another church in town, had come to realize the necessity of staying in one place. Martin Luther had come to realize the importance of remaining in the Word of God—the only source of truth, the only source of real freedom.

In John 8, we find Jesus speaking about the importance of remaining in his Word and why those who remain in his Word, like Luther, are blessed. Jesus was in the city of Jerusalem for a religious festival, but this time in Jesus’ life and ministry is also described as his “Year of Opposition.” At every turn, Jesus’ enemies tried to trip him up or take him down. The group who most fiercely opposed Jesus was the Pharisees. Many religious leaders and the most learned theologians came from their ranks. They were known for their strict adherence to Jewish law and their knowledge of God’s word, but deep down they were self-righteous hypocrites who fiercely opposed God’s long-promised Messiah.

These Pharisees opposed Jesus wherever he went. They did everything they could to discredit him and his message of grace, to turn the people away from Jesus or even against him. Yet for every challenge, Jesus had a Scriptural response. For every accusation, Jesus had concern and love for their souls. For every attack, Jesus had a defense, and no matter how hard they tried, **“as he was saying these things, many believed in him.”** (8:30)

Jesus wasn’t performing miracles like healing the sick or raising the dead. He was proclaiming freedom to the captives. For those who believed in him, they could feel the shackles of guilt and unbelief slip from their hearts. They could see the chains break, and the brutality of sin and Satan vanish into nothing, but the freedom they were enjoying was still uncertain.

Being the almighty God, Jesus knew that. He knew exactly what they needed to remain free for all eternity. **“[T]o the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you continue in my word, you really are my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’**” If they were going to continue in their faith in Jesus, they needed to continue in his Word. They needed to remain steadfast in his Word because

remaining in that Word truly made them Jesus' disciples. Yet for them to continue as his disciples, they could not waver or depart from that Word. To leave that Word and follow the Pharisees or their own sinful ways could be eternally destructive. Like a parent telling their child to "stay here," Jesus told these spiritually young followers to remain in his Word.

By remaining in his Word, they would come to personally know and experience the truth—not just head knowledge, but in their lives. They would personally come to know the liberating truth of Christ their only Savior. **"...And the truth will set you free."** Remaining in the Word of God would make them truly free from the burden of their guilt and unbelief.

Unfortunately there weren't just freed followers of Jesus in that crowd. Jesus' enemies were still there. They attacked Jesus again as they picked up on one of his phrases and completely ignored everything else he said. **"We are descendants of Abraham...and we have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say that 'You will become free'?"**

They were blinded by their own self-righteousness and the false belief that by being physically related to the old patriarch Abraham they were good with the holy God. They ignored the history of slavery endured by their forefathers under Egypt and Assyria and Babylon and the Greeks and the realities of Roman oppression and slavery in their own society to proclaim their pride in being a "free" nation from Abraham's line.

...But Jesus wasn't talking about physical slavery. No, he was speaking of the slavery of sin and guilt and unbelief. To make this absolutely clear, Jesus explained in no uncertain terms why he was there and what he had come to do. **"I assure you: Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. A slave does not remain in the household forever, but a son does remain forever. Therefore, if the Son sets you free, you really will be free."**

"Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Everyone—there is no exception, no exclusion in that word, not even you and me. By nature, we are all slaves in some way, shape, or form. Every time you sin, your sinful nature simply tightens the chains. Every time you give into that sin of weakness that plagues you, Satan cackles as he piles on more guilt you can't do anything about. The world laughs at you as a hypocrite or simply another fool so blinded in sin that you just ignore the truth about your slavery. By nature, I am not free, and neither are you.

That means you cannot free yourself and neither can I. That means I cannot decide to be free and neither can you. That means your loved ones, your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers, your classmates are not free either. By nature, you cannot free them no matter how hard you try.

...But Jesus, who reveals himself in the Word, can. Jesus does. Jesus will. **"If the Son sets you free, you really will be free."** Jesus sets you free as you get to know him through his Word, where you find out how Jesus "redeemed" you. That redemption has nothing to do with coupons. No, it has everything to do with the price Jesus paid to the holy God for your freedom—the price of a perfect life free of the burden of guilt, the price of an innocent death to break open the shackles of your sin, the price of an empty tomb to guarantee your freedom in him.

As a blood-bought, redeemed child of God set free by Christ, the words "I am free" take on a whole new meaning as you leave the broken shackles and the shattered chains and the impossible burdens behind. You are free! The Son sets you free, so you are really, truly free. No matter the guilt you bear, no matter what happened in your past, no matter where you came from or where you're at right now, the truth of Christ revealed in his Word sets you free giving you a truly "free" life in Christ filled with hope and forgiveness.

That clear truth set free the enslaved heart and mind of young Martin Luther 499 years ago. Luther was so burdened by the constant guilt he felt that on several occasions he tried to beat the guilt out of himself until he became unconscious. Yet when he was given the opportunity to study and teach the Word of God in Wittenberg, lo and behold, Jesus set him free.

It wasn't a mighty miracle or show of force, but the clear words of Scripture, **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."** (Romans 3:23-24) In a hymn he wrote years later, Luther described what happened, **"But God beheld my wretched state before the world's foundation, and, mindful of his mercies great, he planned my soul's salvation. A Father's heart he turned to me, sought my redemption fervently; he gave his dearest treasure."** (Christian Worship 377:4) Real freedom comes only through Christ. In a world enslaved by

sin and unbelief, the only way to freedom is through the Word to Jesus. The only path to freedom, then, is to remain in God's Word, to stay in his Word and not depart from it, to live in his Word always.

Yes, like some in those temple crowds, there are plenty of sin-blinded slaves out there who don't want to hear Christ's message of freedom or don't want you or anyone else to remain in his Word. Yet in God's Word alone, you are Christ's disciple. In God's Word alone, you learn and experience the only truth that can set you free from the slavery of guilt and unbelief. In God's Word alone, you come to know the Savior who sets you free from that slavery and who will bring you to the glories of heaven someday.

As heirs of the Reformation and co-heirs with Christ, we remain in that Word and continue in the pure teaching of that Word, even as we proclaim that Word, that message of freedom, to many others. May Christ our Redeemer enable us to continue faithfully in his Word of truth, proclaiming his message of freedom until he comes again! Amen.