

Sermon: Year B, Reformation Sunday
Texts: Jeremiah 31:31–34, Romans 3:19–28, John 8:31–36
Preached: October 29, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace and peace to you from the God who sets us free. AMEN

I'm going to admit another of my deep, dark secrets. Brace yourselves...it's embarrassing, but...I can't dance. Seriously. I cannot dance. You know that show, "So You Think You Can Dance"? I can't. Nope. Not at all. I get on the dance floor and I freeze. Despite my basically musical nature, I cannot seem to connect the rhythm of the music and the muscles of my body. I used to blame it on the fact that I grew up Southern Baptist and we weren't allowed to dance because it was considered sinful. And those restrictions I was taught probably are part of it. But it's also that I become terribly self-conscious, focused on myself. I'm convinced that everyone on the dance floor, everyone even standing around the edges of the dance floor, all of them surely have their eyes trained on me saying, "Would you look at that fool??" I at one time thought maybe that it was just modern dancing that I couldn't do, because you have to make it up as you go along...so I thought maybe the trick would be to learn dances that have set steps, "rules," if you will. Not so much. Despite the fact that I can indeed count at least to four, I am incapable of doing the two-step. I manage to count to three for the waltz, but look vaguely like a marionette while doing so...and my lips move. I went for line-dancing lessons once, and instead of gliding across the floor to "Achy Breaky Heart," I ended up with an achy breaky butt when I moved backward as everyone else moved forward, and I tripped over the folks in back of me. I get so bound up in myself, and so flustered by fear, that I forget everything. I can't even follow someone else's lead with them telling me what to do. I keep thinking there's a formula that I can follow, but the music starts, and I can't move. I long to soar, to feel that freedom...but my fear and my focus on myself and on my limitations somehow won't let me. I am a slave to my fear, and so I miss the joy of the dance.

This afternoon at our Common Prayer Service with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, we'll be singing a dance-y little song: *If you believe and I believe, and we together pray, the Holy Spirit must come down and set God's people free, and set God's people free, and set God's people free, the Holy Spirit must come down and set God's people free.* But what is it that we're asking the Spirit to set us free *from*? We're all slaves to something, if we're honest with ourselves. Slaves to our jobs, slaves to our past, slaves to those who have power over us, slaves to addictions, slaves to all-consuming illnesses, or to enduring grief, slaves to what others think, slaves to our possessions, slaves to perfection and following all the rules, slaves to guilt, slaves to our fears, slaves to our anger, slaves to our regrets. What is the slavery that binds you and keeps you captive? What are the things that are keeping you from living life fully? What's keeping you from knowing the freedom that God intends for you? What's keeping you from dancing?

It is in our nature to enslave ourselves, or to be enslaved by other things or other people, or by situations in our lives. We may be convinced that our slavery is the only way there is. Sometimes our slavery feels safer than freedom, because our slavery has nice, clean, reassuring boundaries, and freedom doesn't. Sometimes we convince ourselves that the slavery really *is* freedom, and that we're going to find fulfillment in the very things that are binding us. Whatever the case, though, we return again and again to slavery, to the relative comfort of our bondage.

It's not a new story. The Prophet Jeremiah speaks of God's former mighty acts in leading the children of Israel out of their very literal slavery in Egypt...but rather than continuing in the freedom God offered them, the freedom God promised them in a covenant with them, they had found new ways to enslave themselves, and had been enslaved by others, and had forgotten the God who had liberated them. And as a result, their country has been invaded, the best and the brightest have been hauled off into exile in Babylon, the kingship has been ended, Jerusalem has been laid waste, the Temple has been destroyed. Jeremiah brings God's word to them in the depths of their despair and humiliation. But in spite of all that, just a few verses before, God speaks to them, not to announce their rejection for having forgotten God, but instead to remind them of something vital: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." And then there's a marvelous promise: "Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers." Dancing is the prelude to restoration.

Our God is a God who desires our freedom, who wants to bring us out of bondage, who wants to free us and claim us as beloved heirs and children, not as slaves. That has been God's design from the beginning: freedom. That is God's desire for us, and that is God's promise to us. We can count on it. When Jesus says in today's gospel passage, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," it's important to know that the Hebrew word for "truth," the word that underlies the word that Jesus used, is a word that means "reliable, steadfast, that which you can count on." Those are the descriptions throughout the Hebrew scriptures for who God is, for how God acts toward God's people...with steadfast love, with unshakeable reliability, even when we wander away into bondage, even when the broken realities of this world try to claim us and enslave us.

We forget God's steadfast love so easily, don't we? We forget it as individuals, and begin to doubt God's love...but God always finds a way to free us from the things that bind us. And when those things are slavery of our own creation, God develops amnesia, and doesn't even remember what we've done. All that matters to God is that we find our freedom. All that matters to God is that we learn to dance once again.

We as the church can forget that freedom, as well. The church can enslave itself to rules, and dogma, and doing everything just so...and at times the church has become a slave master itself, stifling the freedom that Christ offers us, forgetting the liberating power of the Good News. On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we remind ourselves that the church, too, sometimes needs to be freed from bondage to the chains that we ourselves place on the Good News. Luther was one voice among many over the centuries that have reminded God's people of the liberating power of what Christ Jesus has done for us, making us free children of God, not oppressed slaves. But just as we do as individuals, we must keep reforming, must keep being freed, must keep reminding ourselves of God's steadfast faithfulness to us. We cannot bind ourselves to the slavery of fear for the future. We cannot bind ourselves to the slavery of refusal to change.

We as the people of God gathered in congregations can become enslaved, as well. We become enslaved to "the way we've always done it," we become enslaved to our buildings and our budgets, we become enslaved to our worries, enslaved to our apathy, enslaved to our weariness. We forget how to dance. You know, when the Reformation began, there was this incredible energy that swept through the congregations as they began to experience their freedom. People were told that they could, and should, read and interpret scriptures for themselves, in their own language, and so they began eagerly gathering in Bible study groups. Lutheran congregations began to experiment with the Mass, and heard Luther and Melancthon saying that it wasn't necessary that rituals and ceremonies be everywhere the same. If bells and incense worked in your context, then knock yourselves out. If an utterly simple liturgy worked in your context, then do it! It wasn't that it was now, "anything goes." The Reformers gave lots of instruction for how to prevent things from going off the rails. But there was this amazing rush of creativity and freedom that allowed a fresh wind to sweep through the church, setting it free to speak the Word of God in a new way for that age. New technologies, new arts, new music were employed to spread the liberating word of freedom in Christ.

God frees us in Christ not because we have done anything to merit it, not because we have kept all the rules, not because we've earned a place in the household. God desires our freedom simply because that is who God is. God longs to have beloved children in full and mutual relationship, not slaves who act out of fear. God showers us with grace, showers us with abundance, in spite of our failings, in spite of the ways we turn in on ourselves, in spite of our brokenness. Every time we wander off, or are carried off, God wants to remind us that we are loved with an everlasting love, and that nothing can separate us from that love. God longs to free us from our fears, from our restrictions, and to join in active relationship with the liberating God who loves us so much, to truly know God in our deepest hearts. God wants us to dance.

Here's what Fr. Richard Rohr has to say: "At a certain point, God becomes more a verb than a noun, more a process than a conclusion, more an experience than a dogma, more a personal relationship than an idea. There is someone dancing with you, and you are not afraid of making mistakes."

In that relationship of steadfast love, in stretching out our hands over and over again to be led out of bondage by Christ's hand, we find our freedom. Christ then calls us to stretch out our own hands, and to lead all our fellow slaves out with us in joyful dance, hand in hand. Christ calls us to use all that has been entrusted to us—our resources, our time, our talents—so that all can know freedom from bondage, so that all can join the dance of freedom. Now that's a dance I think I can feel good about...grab your tambourines!

AMEN